

**Becoming Comfortable with Self**  
**Young Gays and Lesbians: Lives and Relationships**



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## **Declaration**

I declare that I, myself, have composed this thesis and that the work is my own.

Anne Elizabeth Robertson



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## **Abstract**

Young gays and lesbians are often marginalized in both youth research and adult gay and lesbian research. This study seeks to add voice to their experiences. The focus of the research is on the process of becoming comfortable with self and the development of relationships and intimacy. The research aims to add to the sociology of stories by incorporating a symbolic interactionist and psychoanalysis perspective on the stories of the young gays and lesbians interviewed in this study. A new, but as yet incomplete, picture is provided of young gays' and lesbians' perceptions and practice of sexual relationships. Social and family relationships uncovered in this research are fraught with difficulties. The influences of the cultural representations of homosexuality have had a profound impact on the respondents' sense of self. Despite the move towards freedom of expression and the opening up of social spaces for gays and lesbian there exists for the young problematical social and psychological barriers. This makes both the transition from young person to adulthood and their subsequent integration into society difficult. Despite these problems young gays and lesbians are constructing new ways in which to act and tell their story.

## Contents

Declaration

Acknowledgements

Abstract

	Page No.
Chapter 1: Introduction	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Mark's Story	2
1.3 Plan of the Thesis: The Story	4
Chapter 2: Stories and the Self	
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Stories	12
2.3 Psychoanalysis: Self and Story	14
2.4 Symbolic Interactionism: Self and Story	20
2.5 Scripts	28
2.6 The Unconscious Reassessed	32
2.7 Conclusion	36
Chapter 3: Literature Review: Representations of the Homosexual	
3.1 Introduction	38
3.2 Theorising Homosexuality: Multiple Explanations	39

3.3	The Homosexual Role or Deviations of Sexual Object	42
3.4	The Sexual Community: Towards Ethnicity	46
3.5	Cultural Differences	47
3.6	Self Definitions and the Legitimisation of Homosexuality	48
3.7	The Social Construction and Essentialism Debate	54
3.8	The Umbrella of Queer Theory	59
3.9	Sexuality as Identity: Behaviour and Coming Out	62
3.10	The Sexual Body: Theory and Practice	65
3.11	Erotic and Gendered Bodies	66
3.12	Body as Performance	69
3.13	The Place of the Lesbian: On the Margin or the Front Page?	70
3.14	Situating the Homosexual: A Conclusion	75

#### Chapter 4: Changing Worlds and Representations of Young People

4.1	Introduction	77
4.2	Changing Social Worlds	77
4.3	The Changing Family	79
4.4	The Information Age	82
4.5	Changing Images of Young People	84
4.6	Contradictory Messages	84
4.7	Adolescence or Youth	86
4.8	Youth and Identity	89
4.9	Gay and Lesbian Youth Research	98
4.10	Conclusion	101

Chapter 5:	Young People and their Relationships	
5.1	Introduction	103
5.2	Friendships: Gay and Lesbian	103
5.3	Friendship Research	106
5.4	Family	115
5.5	Sexuality and Youth	118
5.6	Conclusion	121
Chapter 6:	Researching Young Gays and Lesbians	
6.1	Introduction	123
6.2	Locating the Research Topic: Insider Status and Rhetoric	124
6.3	Development of a Theoretical Position	128
6.4	The Issue of Researching Differences	131
6.5	Sample and Recruitment	134
6.6	Strategies of Inquiry	137
6.7	Interview	138
6.8	Practicalities: Ethical Issues	144
6.9	Analysis of the Data	146
6.10	Ensuring Quality	149
6.11	Plan of Data Chapters	151
6.12	Biographies	153

Chapter 7:	The Beginning, Alone, Intra-psychic Scripts	
7.1	Introduction: The Ingredients and the Story	159
7.2	Starting the Journey: The Respondents	163
7.3	Private Worlds	166
7.4	What is This Thing Called Sexuality?	174
7.5	Written Information	180
7.6	Information From Friends and Family	181
7.7	Taking the First Step	182
7.8	Relationships During this Period	188
7.9	It Just Sort of Happened	195
7.10	Conclusion	196
Chapter 8:	Family and Friends	
8.1	Introduction	199
8.2	An Exemplar	200
8.3	Telling Others	203
8.4	Telling For the First Time	205
8.5	Telling Friends: The First Time	205
8.6	Hostility and Bullying	210
8.7	Controlling the Information	212
8.8	Coming Out: Meeting Other Gay People	214
8.9	Telling Parents	217
8.10	School Authority: Telling	229
8.11	Conclusion	232

Chapter 9:	Love and the Future	
9.1	Introduction	235
9.2	Male Respondents: First Loves, First Time	237
9.3	Sexual Release	244
9.4	How Does One Meet People?	247
9.5	Male Views: What is a Relationship?	251
9.6	The Female Respondents	257
9.7	Female Respondents: First Love, First Time	258
9.8	Sexual Relationships with Men	260
9.9	Female Views: What is a Relationship?	263
9.10	The Future	264
9.11	Last Words	269
9.12	Conclusion	270
Chapter 10:	Multiple Stories	
10.1	Introduction	273
10.2	Reflections on Methodology: The Partnership of Symbolic Interactionism and Psychoanalysis	275
10.3	Stories for Self: Intra psychic stories	278
10.4	Social Audiences of Stories	281
10.5	Intimate Social Audiences	286
10.6	Sexual Stories	291
10.7	The Nature of the Stories	295
10.8	The Social Context of the Stories and Relationship with the Wider World	297
10.9	Conclusion and Implications for Future Research	302

10.10 Final Words	305
References	307



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

When I was one  
I'd just begun

When I was two,  
I was nearly new.

When I was three,  
I was hardly me.

When I was four,  
I was not much more

When I was five,  
I was just alive.

But now I am six, I'm as clever as clever.  
So I think I'll stay six for ever and ever.  
(A.A. Milne, 1927)

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis sets out to document the experiences of seven young gay men and seven young lesbians. They range in ages from 13 years old to 21 years old and all grew up in Scotland. The thesis seeks to add to the politics of story telling to give voice to the young and their experiences whilst growing up. It aims to set their discourse within the body of literature on the self and homosexuality, to add an embodied self to the too often abstract theoretical accounts of their lives. The thesis starts with one such story. This story has been chosen to illustrate some of the issues facing young gay people that are discussed in the thesis.

## 1.2 Mark's Story

*Mark: So anyway bought, I bought a load of 50 Paracetamol and Codeine and a pack of 12 Ibuprofen. You know, I didn't have any intentions of doing anything, you know it was just because I was getting headaches. And then when I got back, by this point I was just basically living at my grandmothers. She lives only a hundred yards up the road from my parents. And, I can't remember. She just said something to me and I was just, was like, I absolutely fucking hate my life. I mean it's like, it's all these people, and they were all miserable. You know, I mean they were all content, but none of them looked as though, they'd seen happiness for the last 20 years.*

*Suddenly I just totally, something just snapped and I just went up the stairs. I put the stereo on loud. Had Alan Morissey on. I remember that and... Oh yeah I'd also bought 2 CDs that day. Em, I can't remember what the second one was. Em, anyway, so I just sat there, a carton of milk, a glass, just pouring, taking pills, just, em, took them all. I mean I remember by the time you know I'd sort of like finished taking them, I, you know, it was a very bizarre experience. It was like all sensation like touch, everything was so numbed down and you just felt. I can't explain what the feeling was like, but it was, I was just so high.*

AR: What was going through your head at the time? I mean, what thoughts were going through your head?

*Mark: I was just like, that's it. Had enough. Not taking, putting up with this shit anymore. Em, it's like you know, started making effort and then you see all these people and, you know they're 30 years older than I am and they're still in the same situation. It's like, fuck it. I'm not taking another 30 years of this.*

AR: And how were you feeling?

Mark: *I felt so happy. It was just everything was released, everything. It was like. I just didn't give a shit. Em, I mean, I kind of, I told. Well I let my grandmother read a little sort of snippet out from like ... book. You know you get a little notepad and you know get friends to write in it when you leave school. Em, and anyway this one said quite blatantly that yes I was gay and she was like. So is that what's wrong? And I was like, duh. What do you bloody think? Em, and anyway I made her promise she wouldn't tell my grandfather, and five minutes later she did. So at that point, it was like you are never getting told anything again. But I thought, well you know it doesn't really matter.*

AR: Is this why you've taken the tablets?

Mark: *Oh yeah. I mean I was totally off my face. But anyway you know eventually they, realised. They knew I'd bought all the pills and then they you know put two and two together. Then my grandmother went mental em; you know taken to the hospital. Em they didn't actually pump my stomach. It was one of the charcoal based suspension solutions and actually I remember just complaining that it was too damned sweet. Apart from that, I thought it was really quite nice and which is so bizarre. Em, but I remember the next morning because of the drugs they put me on to sort of, save my liver I was so ill. And I remember when the, you know the little show and tell, when you know the big doctor comes round with the little medical students, and the doctor just saying. You know taking pills just isn't the answer. And I just was in such disbelief. And I just wanted to say. What the fuck would you know? But I was, just felt so bad I just like euh. And I remember that so clearly. I was just so astonished that he had said that. But, so that was that.*

### **1.3 Plan of the Thesis: The Story**

I chose to start with a story as stories are the central focus of this thesis. Chapter 2 starts with a discussion of some of the issues that surround the analysis of stories and the construction of self. Understandings of the nature of the self have been approached from a variety of theoretical positions. This thesis explores both symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis as ways of understanding self. Stories have been used within psychoanalysis to explain who we are as people. Freud illustrated his works with familiar narrative explanations and his techniques involved the uncovering of individual stories rooted in the unconscious. Plummer (1995), from a symbolic interactionist perspective, advocates the creation of a sociology of stories and his particular interest is in the field of sexual stories. Each of these approaches to stories adds different layers to our understanding of both the social and personal world we inhabit. However, it is the work by Plummer (1995), which adds the voice of lesbian and gay experiences to the debate on homosexuality. He argues that it is through the medium of stories that their voice is heard. The development of story allows the creation of the sociology of stories, which enables a richer multi-textured social analysis of the lives of young gays and lesbians to occur.

Narratives about homosexuality have long been the preserve of theorists and academics. Chapter 3 is a review of the literature on the homosexual subject. The theoretical discussion continues to explore symbolic interaction and psychoanalysis and explores the early work by Freud (1905) in contrast to work on the homosexual role by McIntosh

(1968). The liberation movement and search for gay ethnic identity (Epstein, 1987) and defining what constitutes the gay community (Weeks, 2000) are issues that are addressed in this chapter. The place of the lesbian within the larger discussion of homosexuality is also discussed as it is debatable whether lesbian concerns have been represented within the bulk of the literature on homosexuality (Kitzinger, 1987). Within the discussion on homosexuality the work by the identity theorists Cass (1984) and Troiden (1989) adds another perspective. There are within this chapter multiple representations of the homosexual subject.

The young man in this story is facing a profound period of social and personal change, therefore it is necessary to explore the prevailing changes surrounding young people's lives. Chapter 4 is primarily concerned with change. The topics discussed are the changing representations of young people and the social landscape they inhabit. Young gay and lesbians are growing up in a very different landscape from the young gays and lesbians of the 60s and 70s, with different social pressures and images. A theoretical understanding of this landscape is provided by Giddens (1991); Beck (1992) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), and in addition data on social change, Furlong & Cartmel (1997); Roche & Tucker (1997) will provide useful insight into the factors affecting young gay and lesbian lives. There is also a body of literature, which specifically researches gay and lesbian young people, which requires discussion (Warwick *et al*, 2001; Rivers & Carragher, 2003 and Ellis & High, 2004). The research into gay and lesbian young people is wide-ranging, for example school, families, homelessness and suicide, and is from both sociological and psychological perspectives.

The respondents in this study are young people and it is therefore necessary to examine the literature on the nature and development of adolescence (Freud, 1924; Erikson, 1959; Coleman, 1974, 1978; Coleman & Hendry, 1999 and Thomas, 2005).

Chapter 5 is an analysis of the lives of young people, in particular young gays and lesbians. The focus is on relationships and explores friendships, sexual relationships and family relationships (Weston, 1991; Goossens & Marcoen, 1999; Crosnoe, 2000 and Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). A picture of the social world of young people is also required and this is furnished by the works of Hey (1997), Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Griffin (1997 & 1993) whose writings explore the socialisation of young people mainly in the school environment. All of the respondents in this study had been at school whilst they attempted to discover who they were and notions about their sexuality.

The social space that the young gays and lesbians occupy is mediated by gender. The respondents face the task of positioning their gender within their sexuality. The respondents were male and female. This necessitates discussing the works of: Fuss (1989); Butler (1993); Connell (1996); and Segal (1997), all of whom theoretically provide insights into this debate. The wider debates of gender and sexuality require for the purposes of this thesis to be applied to the lives of young people. Wight (1996) and Holland *et al* (1998) are writers who explore the sexual relationships of young people. The review of the literature leads me to conclude that the place of young gay and lesbian

people is often forgotten or marginalised. There is a paucity of research into the relationships that young gays and lesbians form.

Chapter 6 sets out the methodological issues involved in researching the lives of young gays and lesbians. This chapter discusses the theoretical position used with this research and the potential benefits of using both a symbolic interactionist approach and psychoanalysis to understand the stories that are recounted within the thesis. Within any research into non-heterosexual populations problems of sampling and definitions arise. The debates within the literature are extensive (Heaphy *et al*, 1998) as to who should be included in a sample. There are other issues such as insider status (Platzer, 1997) and representation (Kitzinger, 1989), which are addressed. The relationship that the researcher has with the participants in a study is crucial; the relationship frames the construction of the data. The chapter concludes with a plan of the data chapters.

The next three chapters are the presentation and analysis of the data. Chapter 7 examines the internal worlds of young gays and lesbians. It also explores their ideas of what it means to be gay or lesbian. This chapter has as its focus the intra-psychic scripts of the young gays and lesbians. The areas uncovered are how the social representations of homosexuality feed into their knowledge of self. The process of becoming comfortable with self and the disclosure of self to self is a theme of this chapter. The effects of non-disclosure of their sexuality on the relationships with peers form a substantial part of this chapter. This chapter is approached from both a symbolic interactionist perspective and a psychoanalysis stance.

The focus of chapter 8 is the public acknowledgement of their sexuality and the subsequent impact on social relations. The chapter starts with Mark's story and discussion on disclosure of sexuality and the issues surrounding disclosure. In an attempt to provide the reader with an embodied image of the participants the chapter utilises a biographical presentation. The biographical presentation reflects the themes of the chapter. The chapter focuses on peer relationships and family relationships. This chapter is analysed from a symbolic interactionist perspective and is influenced by the work of Plummer.

Chapter 9 presents the respondents' views on sexual relationships and their future lives. The discourses of the young gay participants and lesbians are divided along gender lines. The young gay participants tell very different stories about sex and love from the young lesbians. These stories are as yet incomplete. This chapter examines the sexual scripts of the respondents' and is influenced by the work of both Simon (1996) and Wight (1996).

Chapter 10 is the final discussion drawing the data and literature together. The presentation of the data using psychoanalysis, symbolic interactionism and scripts provides new insights into the lives of the participants. The research mirrors previous research in that incidents of personal and social anguish are evident in the young participants' lives. This has serious consequences for educational, health and social providers both locally and nationally. A new, but as yet incomplete, picture is provided on young gays' and lesbians' perceptions and practice of sexual relationships. The intra-



psychic scripts in chapter 7 remind us that we live in a hetero-normative culture in which young gays and lesbians do daily battle with often serious personal consequences.

The stories of young gays and lesbians can now be heard publicly. It is necessary that the voices of young Scottish gays and lesbians are heard in the new devolved political landscape of Scotland, that their voices are added to the debate on the social structure of Scotland and that their needs are addressed so that young gays and lesbians are able to claim their rightful place as fully acknowledged citizens within Scotland.

## Chapter 2

### Stories and the Self

#### I Was Looking A Long While

I was looking a long while for a clue to the history of the past for myself,  
and for these chants—and now I have found it;  
It is not in those paged fables in the libraries, (them I neither accept nor reject;)  
It is no more in the legends than in all else;  
It is in the present—it is this earth today;  
It is in Democracy—(the purport and aim of all the past;)  
It is in the life of one man or one woman to-day—the average man of to-day;  
It is in languages, social customs, literatures, art;  
It is in the broad show of artificial things, ships, machinery,  
Politics, creeds, modern improvements, and the interchange of nations,  
All for the average man of to-day.  
Whitman, Walt (1819b-1892d)

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss my interest in understanding the stories that individuals relate to explain their lives, emotions and aspirations. My initial interest in narrative and story came about through my practice in the mental health field. Within this field the primary use of narrative and story is the analysis and reconstruction of an individual's life stories to create a more cohesive sense of self. Whilst listening to individuals' stories I developed through my practice a deep unease in relation to purely psychological explanations of human behaviour and awareness that social factors play a significant part in individuals' lives and construction of self. This led me to consider whether a multidisciplinary approach to the exploration of individuals' life stories may be more useful than the dichotomous splitting of psyche and social.

Within this chapter I will discuss the use of story using a Psychoanalytic Approach, symbolic interaction and the sociology of stories. Psychoanalysis initially started as one theory it has now branched into numerous schools of thought. They all however utilise the analysis of life stories as an entrance into understanding an individual's psyche. Symbolic interaction views the construction of self through the individual's interaction with society and Plummer (1995) uses this approach as the basis of developing the sociology of stories. Each of these approaches has at their centre a view of what it is to be human. They each hold a variety of positions on the nature of the self and how it is constructed. Rather than consider each of the two approaches as contradictory I aim to show that in order to develop a fuller understanding of individuals' lives both of these approaches offer a necessary perspective. The chapter will also include a discussion of sexual scripts and propose that through this approach it is possible to use both symbolic Interactionism and psychoanalysis as a means to add deeper understanding of life stories.

The primary concern of this chapter is to explore whether the use of story within the psychoanalysis and symbolic interaction paradigms can be usefully employed in the analysis of data not as competing paradigms but as complementary approaches to facilitate understanding of the development of self and the structure of society. In particular Giddens (1991) will be discussed as he offers an alternative view of the unconscious and conscious debate in influencing human action.

## 2.2 Stories

Stories and the art of telling stories are central to our everyday life. They are so familiar that it runs the risk of not being critically evaluated. We are surrounded by stories from the cradle to the grave. We tell others about our self, our experiences and our life through stories. One can explore how stories are crafted and constructed as well as analysed using different theoretical perspectives. It is not my intention to deconstruct language and use that as the basis of the analysis of stories. However, viewing each story as having a central narrative theme and plot can be useful. It may provide a signpost to the emotional motivation underlying the story. The use of grand narratives—that is everyday stories which we are all familiar with—may provide important indicators as to how individuals shape their self and relationships. Plummer (1995) cites Elsbree (1982) who suggests that there are only five basic plots within all modern stories (Plummer, 1995; 54). These basic plots are not mutually exclusive and within each grand narrative there may be numerous sub plots which add depth to the emotional resonance of the story. The five plots as outlined by Plummer (1995) are: *taking a journey*, *engaging in a contest*, *enduring suffering*, *pursuing consummation*, *establishing a home* (Plummer, 1995; 54). Whilst discussing the utility of this type of analysis for the subsequent data chapters I will briefly illustrate how each of the plots can be applied to the introductory story.

*Taking a journey*: this type of plot suggests to the reader a movement through life either as an exploration of one's past, present or anticipated future. A journey can be viewed as a process or as a destination. It is this type of story that is often related within psychoanalysis and therapy. The motivation for starting the journey is usually a

discomfort with the self and present position. Within these types of story it may be apparent that there are key junctures and experiences for each individual that shape the direction of the journey, which are uncovered through this type of analysis. As can be seen in the introductory story, the thought of the future journey through life was perceived as too difficult.

*Engaging in a contest:* this is life as a struggle against a foe. A foe is something that injures or impedes the self. This can, if applied to gay and lesbian stories, describe the contest against the prevailing heterosexual grand story, the contest to develop a space for self. Questions that arise are: what strategies are the respondents using to win the contest and at what point do they enter the contest? There may be respondents who attempt to give up on the contest, as in the introductory story.

*Enduring suffering:* this is to view one's life as the continuous, never ending experience of pain, punishment and emotional distress. Individuals who recount that type of life story may have constructed a very different sense of self than those who recount the other plots. This type of story raises the question of what the salient life experiences are that lead an individual to this position.

*Pursuing consummation:* the fulfilment of an ideal state or goal involves a transformation of the self. It occurs when there is a disjunction between how an individual perceives present self and the perception of an ideal self. This is a very complicated plot as it is dependent on not only the ability to change self but also an image of what that self could

become. The images of future self may tell us the dominant stories that influence an individual's perception of self. An example of this can be seen in the introductory story where the dominant future story of being gay in the eyes of the respondent is one of misery. The respondent had no ideal state to attain and was left with the ultimate transformation of self—that of end of self—death.

*Establishing a home:* the finding of a comfortable space within ones' social world, the realisation of a haven. This echoes the title of the thesis being comfortable with self. The whole of the data can be viewed in the light of this narrative plot as it attempts to answer the question of how young gays and lesbians find their home, their space and place in today's society.

All of these five plots add another dimension to how I viewed the data and are utilised in my discussion of the respondents' stories. The grand plots which respondents use to frame their story may give insight into their view of social reality. They are frameworks in which to bracket the stories and allow further analysis using social and psychological approaches.

### **2.3 Psychoanalysis: Self and Story**

Psychoanalysis in all its forms is similar to the process of co-authoring a story. It involves two participants; the therapist, who retains editorial control and the narrator, who presents a version of his/her story. The therapist is influenced by their theoretical perspective which directs their attention to salient parts of the narrator's story. The therapist's role is

to rise above the mere words of the story and uncover and guide the narrator to autograph the story. This may be perceived as problematic in that it presupposes an ideal version of the narrator's story and an abdication of control to the therapist. However, I would contend that this is similar to any analysis of story data using any theoretical framework and that this criticism does not take account of the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and the therapist. The role of the therapist is not to provide interpretation but to notice and draw attention to aspects of an individual's story. Therefore, this allows another view of what is happening, another level that may be utilised by the individual. Within any relationship, as the two parties do not occupy the same social space, then it follows that each of us views the same event in a unique manner, thus creating the necessity of the Other. The self in order to know self needs the Other. I cannot perceive all of my self nor understand my position within the social world without the Other. As an individual I may engage in an inner dialogue with myself and this can take place on many levels, some of which I may not be conscious of, for example through dreams. This inner dialogue also becomes an Other and the process of therapy becomes one of uncovering this inner dialogue. In using the therapist as Other my internal Other becomes accessible. This conceptualisation assumes that the psyche, the centre of self, is not a fixed entity but is uncovered dynamically through our interactions with and presentation of stories with the Other.

Freud's conceptualisation of psychoanalysis and a theory of mind echo through much of the reading I have done on sexuality, young people and identity so much so that I felt the

desire to return to his original works in an attempt to ascertain which parts of his theories I wished to use.

Freud was a particularly accessible writer in his day as he skilfully used well known Greek and Roman mythology to illustrate his theories and thus reached a wide audience and was able through his treatise on human mental life to expound his own anti-religious convictions and views of man. It would be unrealistic to attempt a complete analysis of his works as they range from *The Moses of Michelangelo* (1914), a discussion of Michelangelo's statue and the origins of Jews, to numerous case studies and essays on sexuality. His work on sexuality, not just its origins within childhood but also the expression of the erotic and subsequent effect on civilisation, is based on his understanding of mental functioning.

Although he wrote:

In general the restriction of sexual activity in a nation goes hand in hand with an increase in our anxiety about life (Freud, 1908; 104).

his view of humans is one of an animal at war with self and thus civilisation. He was also acutely aware that:

Science has so little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a darkness into which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated (Freud, 1920; 622).



Freud's view of mankind is not one I feel comfortable with. At his bleakest his explanation of man is driven by the sexual drive of *Eros* and the destructive *Thanatos*. In using the story of Oedipus Freud's starting point is a bleak and tragic view of humanity fallen from grace. His overarching plot is one of struggle and contest and there is no consummation.

However, it is his mapping out of the mental mechanisms of the mind that are particularly useful when considering identity, whether or not one agrees with Freud's initial analysis of the root of human drives and their subsequent displacements.

The tasks at this juncture are to unravel some of Freud's contributions to the understanding of the nature of self. Freud postulated that in order to understand pathological processes within the mind it is important to recognise that there was a conscious and unconscious element. Borrowing from Nietzsche's contention that the self was hidden from the self, he expanded his theories to include an organisation of the self. This organisation of the self comprised the *id*, *ego* and *super ego* in which the ego was the control of: 'The discharges of excitations into the external world' (Freud, 1923; 630).

The *ego* does not only house repressed notions, but also an unconscious element. This unconscious element is not a latent preconscious because, if it were, then of course it

would be conscious if it were activated. His notion of the preconscious as different from the unconscious is in his words:

The Pre-conscious is brought into connection with word presentations whilst the unconsciousness is carried out on some material that is unknown (Freud, 1923; 632).

Individuals through sensory experiences can store information in the preconscious, which later becomes accessible through a cue. However, Freud does argue that feelings are either unconscious or conscious and not preconscious as they are transmitted directly. According to Freud (1923), the ego is an aspect of an individual's identity that emerges from the id. The id derives from the biological, inherited, unconscious source of sexual drives, instincts, and irrational impulses. The ego develops out of the id's interaction with the external world. It is produced from social forces brought to bear on an individual's biological development and functions as an intermediary between the demands of the id and the external world. The ego organises an individual's interaction with the internal and external demands of daily living. The ego reconciles the drives of the id with the socially determined constraints of the super-ego. Freud attempted to further explain how all the components of his idea of the self interacted in a very clear manner. He likens the relationship the ego has with the id as one a rider has with a horse. Perhaps what is forgotten is that he embodies this sense of self, the self acts through a body which it must be aware of and which is subjected to sensations, pleasure and pain.

It is however his subsequent ideas of the transference of an erotic object-choice into an alteration of the ego as a method of how the ego controls the id that I find problematic. It harks back to the image of people as savage beasts ruled by their passions. For me the most useful contribution of Freud to the debate on identity is to raise the idea that there is an unconscious and conscious. The assumption of an unconscious influence on our lives assumes that not all our actions are rational, or that we are entirely at the mercy of social forces. The argument is that the unconscious is partly constructed by the repression of painful and difficult experiences and desires. The unconscious serves the theoretical function of making the relation between childhood experience and adult behaviour intelligible. This forgotten experience embedded in the unconscious is uncovered through our stories of self. When examining social action the idea that individuals do repress feelings and are not always initially aware of them either as a feeling or what the feeling is called or what it can be transformed into, does, I believe, have some usefulness.

There is a sense from this that people are internally chaotic which may be preferable to the view of people as a cognitive processing machine that can be altered at will. What Freud (1908) also acknowledged was the existence of dream life, a place where both the conscious and unconscious can be played out, where the stimuli of everyday life are transformed.

Dreams are states from which we awaken sometimes with total recall or a vague sense of unease. Freud (1908) sought to discover if they had meaning and a relationship with the unconscious. Dreams can make sense and be intelligible or be bewildering, or make no

sense whatsoever. Freud's strength is also his weakness and that is a complete focus on the inner workings of the mind. Freud's focus on the inner workings of the mind allows a glimpse of understanding into how people conceptualise their lives at the expense of understanding social action.

Freud (1923) proposes that a sense of guilt and much of our behaviour have inherent biological natural causes. For Freud abnormal behaviour is the result of a conflict between the individual and the attitudes of society, which have been internalised as a conflict, between the desires of the id, the ego and the demands of the superego. The id, the individual's drives and desires, does not emerge out of social behaviour between the individual and members of the group. In addition the superego, the attitudes of the community, have been culturalised and so the superego functions as a censor or restraining force, thus creating anxiety and guilt.

Freud's focus was on internal mechanisms of the mind and as a result totally ignored context. How to transcend this dualism of the relationship between society and the individual in which society is made up of individuals is a problematic area. Symbolic interactionism may best transcend this dualism by exploring the process of identity.

## **2.4 Symbolic Interactionism: Self and Story**

Symbolic interactionism is based on the work of G.H. Mead and has been developed and utilised by Plummer (1975), Simon, (1996) and Gagnon & Simon (1967, 1974) among others as an approach to the study of sexuality and the nature of the self. It differs

radically from Freudian ideas of instinctive drives. Symbolic interactionists reject approaches in psychology and sociology that seek determinist universal laws. Their view of humankind is a humanistic perception, which contrasts sharply with Freud's pessimism. Writers such as Rogers (1961) take a humanistic psychological approach, which is also based on interactions, and this will be included in this section.

Mead's work on child development explored how children achieve a sense of identity. Mead rejected the Freudian notion of an innate self and viewed self as developing from social interaction. Mead argues that the self emerges in the child only because the child is able to take the attitude, the role of the other. Through interaction with parents and other individuals, the self as a social object arises in childhood and it constantly undergoes change as the individual interacts with others in various situations (Mead 1934). The world that we live in according to symbolic integrationists is one which consists of objects, which we attach symbolic meaning to. The child is not guided then by stimuli or response but creates meaning out of their interactions. It is, however, not clear what influences the child to take a particular meaning. The net effect is that our perception of the world is constantly being reconstructed in the light of new information.

Essential to the idea of the self is that humans can be objects to themselves. Mead uses the 'I' and 'me' to describe two phases of the process by which the self is created and recreated. The 'I' is the subject in which people respond to objects or generalised others in their situations.

The 'me' is the responses; that is, when people imagine themselves as objects in their situation. The 'me' is therefore, the sum of a person's experiences. The 'me' arises out of the responses to social stimuli. The 'I', on the other hand, is the immediate, spontaneous, impulsive action of an individual's conduct. The 'I' in Mead's theory can be likened in part to Freud's theory of the id as the impulsive element of the individual. The 'I' or the impulse phase is said to be not under the person's control. In taking the point of view of the other, the person then becomes a 'me'. The 'I' and the 'me' continue to alternate as individuals act. This, according to Mead, is different for each individual, although there are recognisable patterns. People often do not know what they are going to do until they begin to act. It is then that control is exerted. This process is related to an internal conversation. In this the individual runs through an internal dialogue, speaking to self. The self becomes a process consisting of the impulse to act, imagined responses to such an act and imagined alternative actions. This results in resolution of the inner dialogue into some overt course of action. The self is then unlike Freud's self, and is governed by conscious cognitive action. Both Freud and Mead postulate that an internal tension/discomfort of self precede an individual's action. In Mead's theory, consciousness is manifested through action and is constantly changing and developing as we are always becoming.

There is, however, an internal world in this view of self. We do not only imagine how another will react to us but also feel the emotions and sensations we attribute to them. We take on board feelings that we perceive come from others. We do however share universal symbolic meanings and are thus able to anticipate the multiple reactions of

others. As individuals we have some control over this process as we can inhibit our responses, and form images of selves and then choose to act. On the other hand we can refuse to act as expected, choosing inappropriate acts instead. We can act in self-interested ways and choose alternative ways of being. Blumer (1969), utilising Mead's ideas, argues that as individuals we attach meaning to our own and others behaviour. As individuals we analyse all the possible reactions. 'In effect, everything that is perceived in social life refers back to the self, and is given meaning by self-interpretation' (Elliot, 2001; 29).

The construction of social reality is not an isolated individual activity, but can be viewed also as a collective activity. For example, the reality of the school for a group of teachers differs from the reality of the school for the pupils and neither may be aware of others' reality.

The examination of groups and a further development of Mead's ideas were undertaken by Goffman. Goffman (1959) explores the details of individual identity, group relations, the impact of environment, and the movement and interactive meaning of information. He uses the metaphor of the stage to explain his ideas. He was particularly interested in how the individual presented self and the meaning of presentation within the broader social context. Interaction is viewed as a performance, shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with impressions that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor. Through the exchange of information the individual develops



identity as a function of interaction with others. Goffman uses the term 'front', which is explained as:

That part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance (Goffman, 1972; 21).

The actor, in order to present a compelling front, is forced to both fill the duties of the social role and communicate the activities and characteristics of the role to other people in a consistent manner. As the actor constructs a front they communicate, verbally and non-verbally, information that is congruent with the assumed role, all of which must be controlled to effectively convince the audience of the appropriateness of behaviour and fit the role assumed. The behaviour that we then enact has to fit into the commonly held views of what a particular role should be. The actor through verbal signification, which is used by the actor to establish intent, validates this. The audience uses non-verbal signification as a means by which to verify the honesty of statements made by the individual. Individuals then manipulate the presentation of self to match what the audience (which may differ from situation to situation) expects.

Goffman was not only interested in individual actions but group actions, and how the individuals within the group maintained positions to preserve the functioning and aims of a group. Thus, dissent is reduced, as each member has to maintain the front in order to promote the team cohesiveness. To be deviant would result in losing face as well as a



disruption to the group. The danger may be that the individual is then ostracised from the group, and becomes a scapegoat. Goffman's work on groups is useful but misses out the psychodynamic nature of groups. Writers such as Bion (1959) have applied psychodynamic theories to group processes and examined the group as an entity in its own right being a part yet apart from the members. Therefore, issues such as projection and conflict are not just examined as social roles and compliance but as part of group dynamics.

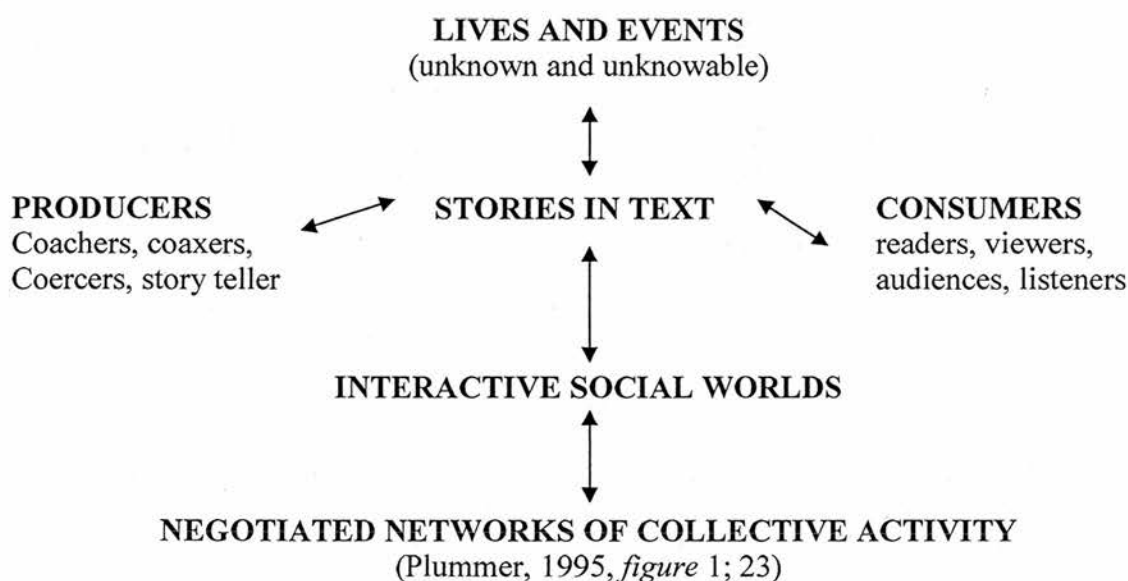
The issue of ideal conduct is further explored by examining those individual who have stigmatised identities. For example if we take a homosexual identity to be stigmatised then homosexuals are forced to be part of a discredited part of society. Others view the homosexual through the lens of sexuality. In order to interact with others they then have to limit the amount of information about self, which relates to their sexuality, in order to escape being stigmatised and set apart. Heterosexuality is a normative discourse within young people's lives. Young gays and lesbians have then to enact the appropriate set of behaviours of this discourse in order to remain part of the group or risk being excluded. The young gay or lesbian in Goffman's analysis is then forced to try and pass as heterosexual. This may lead to feelings of alienation and ambivalence. These will have a profound effect on the types of interaction an individual chooses to have. Goffman's view of identity is that it is constructed through an understanding of the projection of the self to others. Identity is also formed through the experience of action.

From an entirely different theoretical beginning Carl Rogers (1961) explores the nature of becoming persons. His background was psychiatry and he brings the humanist tradition into therapeutic relations. It was from his fieldwork that he became aware of his clients' use of the notion of self. He came to the realisation that individuals live in their own versions of reality where their perception of self acts as a filter to their experiences. This notion of self arises out of our sensory experiences; we are not born with a sense of self, again reinforcing the view that we constantly structure our view of the world. In Rogers' view our versions of reality protect the integrity of our notion of self. In other words we see only that which we want to see or what fits with our perception of self. It is not that Rogers considers that we intentionally set out to do this but that it is the only way to maintain a sense of coherent identity. According to Rogers we also introject the values that come to us from the external world and after time we are unable to distinguish between our internal and external values. In doing so we then lose sight of who we are. What Rogers is trying to explain is that we take on board others' views of self. Rogers considers that this process is because we wish to have social approval and in doing so may lose our sense of congruence.

These theoretical accounts are structuring the sense of self through the interactions with others and in addition acknowledging that self is also an object to self. Self becomes an ongoing reflexive project. This is very different from the Freudian view of man and his relationship with the world and is expressed in a more rational, gentler way than the Freudian view of conflict and anxiety. There are difficulties with symbolic interactionism as presented here as a means of understanding social structures and actions as there is no

notion of graduated response for the individual. There is also a sense of total self-awareness and transparency of the self to self, which may not always be the case. Do I know myself as others do? I suspect not. Despite these reservations symbolic interactionism has progressed and is used by theorists such as Plummer (1995) and Simon (1996). I suspect its recent revival; apart from the inherent merits of the theory is a reaction against the fracturisation of the self, apparent in later theory.

Using symbolic interactionism as a basis of understanding individuals' stories is an approach advocated by Plummer (1995) He advocates that stories can be *seen as joint actions* (Plummer, 1995; 20) that are dependent on all the participative parts. Within the mechanics of story telling Plummer (1995) provides us with a useful diagrammatical representation of the parts.



All of these aspects of stories interact in a dynamic way to produce joint actions which may initially start as a local experience and spread to a wider audience. The gradual movement of 'coming-out' stories from the private to the public audience is an example of this phenomenon. Plummer (1995) suggests several questions that a researcher can ask in order to explore the sociology of stories. The questions that are of interest to this research are the questions relating to how and why the respondents told their stories. These questions are explored in the data chapters. In addition, what happens once the story is told, what role does the story play in a person's life? The telling of sexual stories exists within the wider political landscape of power and inequality. What then is the impact that the private 'coming-out' stories have on the wider social networks and what space is made available for them are issues that require consideration?

Plummer (1995) provides the basis for an examination of the stories within this thesis from a sociological standpoint. The question as to how to marry the psychoanalytical perspective with the symbolic interactionist perspective is not furnished by his approach. It is perhaps with the work of Simon & Gagnon (1974) that this can be taken forward.

## **2.5 Scripts**

Simon & Gagnon (1974) took the work of both role theorists and psychoanalysts one step further and tried to fuse them together. They advocated the notion that sexual behaviour was the playing out of what they called 'sexual scripts'. Their approach put forward several key ideas that require some explanation. They postulate that scripts, 'a metaphor for behaviour within social life', existed on three separate levels. This is divided into

'cultural scenarios'; that is specific cultural guidelines that regulate appropriate sexual behaviour. As can be surmised, these vary through history and place and do not necessarily reflect the life experiences of people. The second script is the 'interpersonal script'. This is the internal reworking of the cultural requirements to fit with the internal desires and situations that an individual may find themselves in. This of course requires another level of scripting because of the internal, mental aspect of the rewriting. This Simon & Gagnon (1974) call 'intra-psychic scripting'. Thus what happens is a three way process in which an individual's desires are mediated and transformed to be part of their self. It is very analogous to Freud's split of the self into super ego, ego and id.

They further argue that within societies with a more fluid cultural regulation on its members this fluidity may create a sense of uncertainty and confusion within the individual. The net result would be either a stronger desire on behalf of the individual to gain a coherent sense of whom they are, or a fragmented presentation of self in different settings. This fluidity and lack of cultural regulation can be further examined relating to sexuality.

The interesting part of their theory for me is not the above, but the introduction of the erotic. Within the notion of the erotic they write about sex involving two people. They introduce the commonsense knowledge that both participants are playing out scripted behaviour, whereas before the focus of theoretical inquiry was on the individual inner workings or the societal regulation of sex. Determining these notions that individuals

have, whether it be male to female or male-to-male, becomes an important step in any research that aims to uncover the underlying meanings.

The playing out of this scripted behaviour between two people is then influenced by the dominant cultural regulations that influence the two participants. Whether that be gender, age or ethnicity these factors require to be translated by the individual into their own intra-psychic script and negotiated within the interpersonal scripts. The inner dialogue becomes an important aspect of what happens. They write:

Unfortunately almost all of our concern with the sexual activity of adolescents' centres upon overt behaviours—which have important consequences—while virtually none of this concern focuses on the imagery informing that behaviour (Simon & Gagnon, 1974; 36).

These words influenced part of the direction of the future research within this thesis, as it seems to me crucial that an understanding of how the social is translated is as important as the structural factors that influence individuals' behaviour.

Simon's (1996) analysis is more concerned with the sexual than with ideas of the self. It is not until he discusses the presentation of desire that he argues that individuals may have hidden agendas. He is following through Freud's argument, as discussed earlier, that the sexual object is a representation of desire. Desires may be transformed into sexual



objects through past experiences. Simon argues that the intra-psychic domain is: 'An autonomous domain; a result of experience' (Simon, 1996; 44).

In short the external world is chaotic and that is reflected in the internal world. He constantly refers to conscious and unconscious desires and seems to suggest the roots of these desires are both social and from the unique psyche of the individual.

Craib (1998) also argues that experience shapes who we are. He also comes to the conclusion that we are not simple social products. There are psychic forces that shape us, albeit in response to social forces.

What both writers are acknowledging is that experience provides us with a sense of self. Self is conscious of self and is concerned not just with action but also with feelings. It is not just how people will react to us that become important, but how we feel about that reaction. These choices are not always rational, nor conscious. Craib expands this to include a discussion on what happens when as individuals our emotions seem to take on a life of their own. Sometimes our emotions seem to rule the self. What becomes an interesting sociological question is why for some individuals their emotions are problematic. Psychoanalysis is one way of exploring what happens when individuals relate on an emotional level. Through the processes of identification and projection an understanding of what occurs within the emotional field can be uncovered.

## 2.6 The Unconscious Reassessed

In response to dissatisfaction with social theory, Giddens (1984) developed structuration theory as a means to explain and integrate agency and structure. Social action according to Giddens consists of human agency and social structure but they are not two separate concepts or constructs. There is a duality of structures which, according to Giddens exists, as: 'Both a medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises' (Giddens, 1984; 374).

Structuration implies the study of the ways in which social systems are produced and reproduced in social interaction. Social interaction produces rules, resources and social relationships. These rules and social relationships are said to exist across time and space. Therefore practices are dynamic in that they are constantly reproduced and become routines that are familiar to the agents. As Giddens (1984) states:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible (Giddens, 1984; 2).

Giddens (1984) further expands his argument to include an explanation of the nature of



self. Whilst rejecting Freudian analysis of the unconscious he introduces another dimension of consciousness, *practical consciousness*. According to Giddens (1984) practical consciousness are practices we know about but cannot give direct discourse expression to. Thus practical consciousness is a wall between that which we monitor and that which we are unaware of. This views humans as being reflective beings who have a *discursive consciousness* in that we can explain some of our actions. This suggests that not all actions are directly motivated. At the heart of his view of self is a belief in *ontological security*. He suggests that humans require a faith and belief that their perceptions of the world are real. This security protects us from anxiety and fragmentation. This ontological security exists through the expression of self which is embodied and enacted in routines and rules that we are familiar with. Self-identity then, according to Giddens, is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person's own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity therefore has continuity but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography. A stable self-identity is based on an account of a person's life, actions and influences which makes sense to them, and which can be explained to other people without much difficulty. It 'explains' the past, and is oriented towards an anticipated future.

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually

integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self (Giddens, 1991; 54).

My first reading of Giddens appeared to offer a solution to my dilemma of the interplay between social theory and theory of the psyche. On reflection I found several of his concepts, ontological security, identity as narrative and his description of consciousness and unconsciousness problematic. I was struck by the absence of any debate within Giddens' work on the epistemology of his position and that his position was not based on research data. I was also at a loss as to how to operationalise Giddens' concepts and whether it was his intention that they were to be used in this way. Although Giddens refers to Freud and Mead within his discussion he omits key aspects of their theories which if acknowledged would negate some of his conceptualisation. Mead, as previously discussed, argues that the individual cannot exist outwith their context and our self consciousness is a product of our social interaction. Giddens' reflexive self appears to be disembodied yet in my view although, at times as individuals it may appear we live in a fractured society our language and concepts are embedded in a historical cultural and linguistic tradition. In essence even our very theorising is rooted in our culture and that may differ across cultural boundaries. Giddens' view of self is problematic in so much as he does not appear to question the origin of the self. I would agree with Kilminster (1991) that Giddens does not demonstrate how the individual developed in the first place. So although Giddens discusses Freudian ideas, he dismisses the construct of the psyche in favour of his view of ontological security and practical consciousness. He is guilty of what Golding (1982) argues is problematic when taking parts of psychoanalysis theory:

'elements cannot be broken off at the caprice of whoever comes along' (Golding, 1982; 548). Giddens makes no acknowledgement of defence mechanisms or separation anxiety within his view of the self which then makes his view of ontological security problematic. Groarke (2002) argues that Giddens' view of ontological security is flawed as:

Giddens blurs the distinction between 'conditions' and 'attributes' by claiming that the substratum of trust is the condition and outcome of 'everyday knowledgability' (Groarke, 2002; 561).

This then raises a paradox according to Groarke: 'how can an attribute of subjectivity also be the condition of its identity?' (Groarke, 2002; 561).

On further reflection on Giddens' theories it became apparent that Giddens' approach of creating new theory from the synthesis of previous social theory, which includes amongst others psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism theory, was not how I had envisaged analysing the data. My position is that I wished to use both psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism as ways of viewing the data not to create a new theory but to provide different perspectives on the data.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Although there are contradictory positions when attempting to utilise both symbolic interaction and psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis does provide useful insight into how to frame the study of identity. As Simon wrote:

I can think of no other conceptual approach that offers more by the way of sensitising us to the significance of intra-psychic life and its dependency upon, and its richness in the processing of the symbolic (Simon, 1996; 60).

What I am trying to put forward is that in any sociological inquiry attention is paid to the emotions and feelings that the respondents say they have. In addition the acknowledgement is made that individuals do not always know themselves as others do. We carry around in ourselves a unique sense of personhood which incorporates our emotions and experiences and internal worlds. All of these areas are important to uncover when exploring social action. Within this research, which explores the notion of becoming comfortable with self, there are two conceptualisations of identity. There is the social identity, which incorporates what it means to be gay or lesbian and how the identity should be enacted. There is also the sense of self, that is how the individuals view and construct self. This sense of self is discovered through intra-psychic scripts whilst social identity is uncovered through the formation of relationships. The self can also be viewed as housing an unconscious element, which, although difficult to uncover when examining social action, may be utilised as another layer of analysis. The medium

through which this may be best achieved is that of story and the analysis of sexual and intra-psychic scripts.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Review: Representations of the Homosexual

#### What Am I After All

What am I after all but a child, pleas'd with the  
sound of my own name? repeating it over and over;  
I stand apart to hear - it never tires me.

To you your name also;  
Did you think there was nothing but two or three  
pronunciations in the sound of your name?  
Whitman, Walt (1819b – 1892d)

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the symbolic interaction and psychoanalysis discussion and starts with a discussion on the work by McIntosh (1968) on the homosexual role and Freud's (1924) psychoanalytical view espoused in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Within academic writings there are a multitude of disciplinary explanations on the nature and place of homosexuality. It is important to explore some of these theories as they influence the direction and nature of past and present research. One of the main UK theorists, Weeks (1986) explores the social creation of diversity in sexual practice using ethnographic methods and charts the modern history of homosexuality. In particular the politics of liberation and the development of community will be explored alongside the notion of ethnic identity. Debate about the search for legitimacy, which took a different form in North America than in the UK, will be discussed in this chapter. No review would be complete without the essentialist, social constructionist debate. The debate

continues with contributions from Fuss (1989) and Foucault (1980). The advent of queer theory emphasising fluid sexuality and the decentering of the subject are taken up by writers such as Epstein (1996) and Seidman (1997). The central focus of the review is on sociological texts. However, Troiden's (1989) research on young people and Cass's (1979) research on coming out, which both take a psychological perspective, are included. The place of lesbianism within the debate on homosexuality will be addressed, a voice often marginalized and forgotten. This review will not include any literature on young people and sexuality, which is dealt with later on in chapter 4, as will work on relationships by Nardi (1999) and work on families of choice by Weston (1991).

### **3.2 Theorising Homosexuality: Multiple Explanations**

The history of the word 'homosexuality' is recounted by David Halperin (1990) in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, And Other Essays on Greek Love*. The very word homosexual came into English only in 1892, formed after a German neologism coined about 20 years earlier. At that time the word 'inversion' was also used (Weeks, 1986). In 1869 'homosexuelle' was coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny; in the same year Carl Westphal introduced the phrase 'die conträre Sexualempfindung' (Halperin, 1990; 155).

The Church and State have viewed the sexual conduct of its members as a legitimate area through which to exercise their control. One of the areas that merited attention has been the regulation of sexual activities outwith heterosexual marriage (Weeks, 1981). As Weeks (1981) writes:

Of all the 'variations' of sexual behaviour, homosexuality has had the most vivid social presence, and has evoked the most lively (if usually grossly misleading) historical accounts (Weeks, 1981; 96).

This initial attention from the State, Church and then medicine in all its forms has burgeoned to the present day preoccupation with sex. Sexuality, in particular homosexuality, is now the concern of academics, the media and citizens. Whatever the reasons for this explosion of concern, of which Foucault and Weeks amongst others have theorised, the net result is a multiplicity of opposing voices clamouring to be heard. All of these voices impact on young people as they attempt to find their place in society. Different explanations as to the place of the homosexual within society and the nature of homosexuality have been produced by the media and academia.

Thus, a multiplicity of theories has been produced in modern times to explain homosexuality (McGuire, 1995). So far, none of them could be said to have produced a complete or satisfactory explanation of homosexuality. There are those theories which cast homosexuality as an error of nature; a freak produced no doubt by nature, but not in accordance with a grand plan (Herrn, 1995). There are in addition psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality (Freud, 1905). They view homosexuality as arising because a fundamental psychic development that normally does occur is somehow disrupted. Arrested maturation, unresolved Oedipal complexes, all depict homosexuality as something that in each individual case should not have happened. These psychoanalytic theories have in general failed to create a coherent explanation. They are, however,



theoretical constructs, which are in the general public domain and as such will be discussed in this section. In addition, Freud's work influences many of the theorists in the field of sexuality.

Some theories conceptualise homosexuality as being a very necessary part of nature, the sociobiological theories: the superior heterozygote fitness theory, the kin-selection theory, and the parental manipulation theory (Ruse, 1988). Each of these theories argues that a gene for homosexuality might be encouraged in a population by natural selection. These issues are well discussed by Hamer & Copeland (1994), who conclude that if there is a gay gene it will be found as a result of the human genome project. There are numerous issues that pose difficulties with theoretically based genetic constructs, for a fuller discussion see Stein (1999). The notion of understanding homosexuality as genetically based does not get over an initial hurdle of implausibility, that each of these theories would require homosexuality to be passed down through the generations which would inevitably lead to no gays or lesbians; a redundancy hypothesis. This would only occur if the genetic theory were an aberrant gene explanation, which would then lead down the biological determinism path. This is a debate that Freud (1924) dismissed decades earlier, arguing that the idea that sexual behaviour was biologically determined did not reflect the evidence. The advent of the gay gene has passed into general culture '*as born that way*'. It is beyond the remit of this work to explore the multitude of genetic explanations, as the focus is more on how individuals conceptualise and fashion their sexuality rather than the search for why are there homosexuals. Nevertheless the popular

notion of '*being made that way*' impacts on individuals' explanations of self as well as being part of the ethnic model of homosexuality, thus it deserves attention.

Knowledge about sexuality, homosexuality has entered the public domain through numerous routes: film, theoretical and fictional texts. Some of the theoretical discussion could be said to have caused disquiet to parts of the gay and lesbian community, for example social constructionism, whilst others have become part of everyday knowledge, for example the phase stage<sup>1</sup>. It is evident that theories on sexuality have varying degrees of authority within popular culture. This could be said to reflect popular conceptualisations of sexuality rather than whether the theory is academically vigorous. It is pertinent to examine popular notions of sexuality to try and ascertain why some views have more cultural capital than others. Why do we hold some explanations of homosexuality above other explanations?

### **3.3 The Homosexual Role or Deviations of Sexual Object**

I have chosen to examine Freud's (1924) work on a theory of sexuality alongside McIntosh's (1968) work on the homosexual role because they were both for their time radical pieces of theorising. This may appear to be rather an unusual pairing as they approach the debate from two entirely different standpoints, but they ask similar questions in respect of the difference between behaviour and individual identity. Their contribution to the debate on homosexuality is pertinent to our present day understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that all human beings go through a phase of homosexual desire on route to the formation of a heterosexual identity. Therefore, homosexuality is conceptualised as arrested development.

There are perhaps some striking similarities in their conclusions, which have been overlooked.

McIntosh's (1968) work on the homosexual role is a seminal piece of work, which explores the move away from seeing the homosexual as a medical condition to that of a social role. The function of this social role serves as a distinction between what is acceptable or not within sexual behaviour. This approach can be viewed as a functionalist and structural account of homosexuality. It is in direct contrast with Freud's (1924) theories of sexuality in that it does not ask what causes homosexuality but instead asks: 'Why are we so concerned with seeing homosexuality as a condition that has causes?' (Weeks, 2000; 54).

It is this departure that paved the way for further examination of homosexual behaviour and homosexual category, the regulation of homosexuality and the location of homosexuality within the dominant heterosexual landscape. It moved the discourse on homosexuality from pathology and the search for causation towards a political and social discourse located within history. These three particular themes feature prominently in the literature and will be revisited within this review.

Freud's interest was in a wider examination of sexuality and its manifestations. The term he uses to describe homosexuality is '*invert*'. He does, however, distinguish between three types: '*absolute*', that is an exclusive homosexual; '*amphigenic*', that is bisexual; and '*contingent*', that is those who are in certain circumstances homosexual. Freud

further examines whether homosexuality is as a result of degeneracy or is innate. Freud as well as McIntosh utilises history to make his case. He regards homosexuality not as degeneracy, because it is remarkably consistent throughout the history of people. McIntosh differentiates between the homosexual behaviour, which has multiple meanings within different cultures, and the development of a homosexual role. Freud alludes to the concept of role and the function of homosexuality when he writes:

Account must be taken of the fact that inversion was a frequent phenomenon — one might almost say an institution charged with important functions (Freud, 1924; 242).

Both writers were placing homosexuality in a social context with a particular function, which has yet to be fully elucidated. This placing of homosexuality as serving a function whether it is to preserve heterosexuality or regulate sexuality is a factor that both McIntosh and Freud refer to.

Freud (1924) addresses the essentialism view of sexuality and in particular homosexuality. Freud (1924) importantly dismisses the idea that homosexuality is innate in that there are too many variations and therefore the universal application of an innate theory cannot be applied. Both McIntosh and Freud acknowledge that homosexuals gain from viewing homosexuality as a condition. This is a debate which surfaces again in the discourse about ethnicity and identity politics. Freud as well as McIntosh pre-dates the social construction essentialism debate, but both writers have acknowledged some of the

elements of the debate. The McIntosh (1968) argument moves towards the social construction of homosexuality through an examination of role whilst Freud (1924) concentrates on understanding the inner workings of the mind. In doing so Freud separates out the social manifestation of sexual behaviour, which he views as constructed from desire and which he views as instinctual. He does caution us against viewing sexual instinct and sexual object as being soldered together and proposes that instinct may be independent of object. This view reiterates that any understanding of homosexuality cannot be done without an understanding of all sexuality (Freud 1924). Freud goes further and proposes that it is through understanding bisexuality that we understand sexuality, an area untouched by McIntosh. Freud (1924) was concerned with the development of sexuality within children and proposed that children had a developmental path towards sexual expression, which was largely forgotten by the individual. Despite the normalisation of this path and a section on the prevention of inversion suggesting some ways inverts may occur, he does conclude with: 'Where inversion is not regarded as a crime it will be found that it answers fully to the sexual inclinations of no small number of people' (Freud, 1924; 292). Again this reinforces the view that the social has influences on the development of sexual object choice.

Although both McIntosh (1968) and Freud (1924) are very different writers, both are challenging the assumption of the homosexual and acknowledging the place of social, political and personal constructs within the debate. Their contribution is immense and in many ways they lay the foundation of future debates.

Both writers use history to make a case, as do future writers (Foucault 1978). This revisiting of the past to find out who we are not is fraught with dangers. Who has constructed the accounts and what presumptions they reflect are important questions.

What is missing from both of these theoretical understandings of sexuality is pleasure and desire. The inner wishes and fantasy of individuals, their wants and longings, are absent. Freud tries to put forward a notion of libido fired by instinct but, as I will argue later, it does not fully encapsulate what people may actually experience. He was, as previously stated, of the view that biology did not shape sexual behaviour, but the introduction of libido and instinct muddy the water. In many respects Freud has started the essentialist social constructionist debate, a mantle to be taken up by future writers.

### **3.4 The Sexual Community: Towards Ethnicity**

This section examines the move from gay and lesbian community politics towards a debate on the appearance of gay and lesbian as an ethnic identity. This can be seen as a move towards the legitimisation of the homosexual as a citizen. Some of the differences between North America and the UK gay and lesbian politics are discussed.

The revisiting of the past within the sexual liberationist part of history was personally disconcerting. Not only am I researching explanations of self, but also my history and interpretations of that history. The liberation politics of the 60's and 70s raised public awareness of homosexuality. They also could be said to have invented the homosexual

subject in its modern form. It is at this juncture that the issue of North American and European literature will be addressed.

### **3.5 Cultural Differences**

Within such a wide topic as homosexuality, the development of the social meaning of same-sex relationships is pertinent. Individuals are influenced by the culture in which they live and how their society explains their choice of erotic partner. This, however, differs within countries. It is not the intention to explore anthropological accounts of same-sex relationships. Nevertheless one of the effects of mass media and Internet access has been the increasing spread of ideas and emergence of dominant ideologies of which North America is an important cultural site. The influence of North American ideology, struggles and debates has not only impacted on academic writings but also on the lives of Scottish citizens. It is for that reason it is important to discuss some of the issues raised of North American literature.

The theoretical roots of much of the North American academic literature are from the humanities and much of the early writing was from a feminist perspective. The majority of the academic work in the United Kingdom (UK) arose from a sociological background and was influenced strongly by the symbolic interactionism approach. The theoretical underpinnings are different, because the social, political and cultural structure of the United States is very different from that of the UK. The research results may not be easily transferable. This is pertinent to much of the research on youth in that there is a greater

organisation of services in the United States<sup>2</sup>, but also on any adult research. For example if one follows Foucault's (1979) argument that homosexuality is a cultural artefact and a modern invention there may be differences between different cultural representations of homosexuality within the United States and the UK. It may even be that there are distinct local differences within different regions of the UK. That is not to say that some of the theoretical understandings are not transferable, but that caution requires to be exercised when viewing data. The struggle for a place for homosexuals within society and the history of that struggle highlights some of the differences between the UK and the United States.

### **3.6 Self Definitions and the Legitimisation of Homosexuality**

The major theorist of the homosexual subject within the UK is without doubt Jeffrey Weeks. He has written extensively on the history of sexuality within Britain, more often than not England, and has contributed to the debate on the construction of homosexuality. Weeks (1986) writes from a political liberationist stance and examines the history of resistance and self-definitions amongst homosexuals. He acknowledges that there are different meanings ascribed to homosexuality. When discussing homosexuality he argues that homosexuality is not just the manifestation of behaviour but:

The overwhelming evidence suggests that sexuality is subject to an enormous degree of socio-cultural moulding (Weeks, 1986; 54).

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<sup>2</sup> Services tend to be focused in urban centres such as Horizons in Chicago, education services in New York and the experiences of young gays and lesbians in rural America are an area of concern, Herdt (1989).



It is the individual's response which is pertinent; in particular the response not just to the everyday lived realities, but also to the debate initiated by queer theorists on what it is to be gay or lesbian. It appeared so simple in the 70s: gays and lesbians were part of an oppressed minority who had to group together, form communities and advocate for their rights

Weeks charts the rise of identity gay politics within the UK and the emergence of the idea of a sexual community. Foucault (1991) puts forward three types of community: 'given community', 'tacit community' and 'critical community' which Weeks (2000) uses to inform his debate.

A given community arises from an identification that I am X. Tacit community is the materially-rooted system of thought that makes X a possible object of identification; and critical community sees this system of thought as singular or contingent, finds something intolerable about it and starts to refuse to participate in it (Weeks, 2000; 182).

Group membership is an important factor to examine within the debate as to what constitutes homosexuality. Weeks (2000) argues that development of community within gay and lesbian life allows there to be a sense of belonging and source of shared values. This begs the question as to what effect these values and sense of group have on the emergent identities of young gays and lesbians, in ways that previous generations did not need to face. Previous gays and lesbians joined together as a haven against the dominant

heterosexual hegemony. Will young gays and lesbians reject the community in favour of creating their own spaces?

There are of course other ways of seeing community and Weeks (2000) argues that the gay community is now a source of social capital. There is a wider benefit in the community's dealings with other organisations. He cites the responses to AIDS as an example. Although that may be the case, it raises more questions as to which participants within the community are viewed as being representative of the community. Those who are outwith a community are often able to perceive different perspectives of that community than from those who are members of the community. One of the effects of AIDS, I would argue, is the disappearance of the lesbian from notions of the homosexual community. In addition, the rise of the white articulate middle class male as the representative of the gay community has now become institutionalised.

Social capital can also exist on an individual level in that being part of a group allows social mobility and entrance to social activities. It may well be that there are different levels of social capital to be found within the 'gay community' and that this may be as restricting as the dominant heterosexual space. These are issues that have yet to be addressed.

Whether the 'gay community' now exists as its participants originally conceived it, is debatable. However, the development of a visible homosexual community did raise the important issue of citizenship in the minds of its members.

Weeks writes:

Sexual identity is a fiction because it is based on the cultural construction of plausible narratives to make sense of individual lives. But it is a necessary fiction because it offers the notion of social agency in a context where equal access to social goods is denied (Weeks, 2000; 192).

It would be remiss of any theorist to ignore the importance of community for individuals even if they are imaginary, as they have an everyday use in the maintenance of identity.

The opening up of social spaces to gays and lesbians is associated with the development of rights and access to citizenship, which has traditionally been a married heterosexual construct. This development of new living arrangements and creation of new social spaces affects not only gays and lesbians, but also all individuals who are not conforming to the traditional heterosexual marriage. The changes and fluidity of social relationships has been well documented by Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1992).

The next step in the search of legitimising identity, which arises from the concept of community, is the idea of an ethnic gay identity. This was a further step in the attempt to legitimise the homosexual subject as deserving of rights. This idea was more prevalent in the United States, which has a long history of rights and struggles for rights. Epstein (1987) charts the rise of this new form of ethnicity, which differs, from previous conceptions of ethnicity. New ethnicity is viewed as something which is constructed and

adopted by the individual. This position differs from the view of ethnicity as being an immutable part of a person ascribed at birth. Epstein (1987) argues that a new understanding of ethnicity has arisen in the United States. This new understanding incorporates socio-political goals and forward looking social change. This new form of ethnic identity as applied to gay people is:

“Future oriented” identity linking an affective bond with an instrumental goal of influencing state policy and securing social rewards on behalf of the group (Epstein, 1987; 23).

The seeds of the movement are based in the liberal politics of the 60s and 70s, and that very liberalism was also its downfall. Seidman (1997) charts some of the key factors within this era. The gay ethnic model according to Seidman was challenged primarily by people of colour and later by people who did not wish to be categorised as heterosexual or homosexual. The people of colour argued that: ‘A discourse that abstracts a notion of gay identity from considerations of race and class is oppressive’ (Seidman, 1997; 123). People of colour were mainly absent from the images of the time that were said to reflect being gay or lesbian. The only images that were available were male, white and middle-class.

The other group who dismantled the notion of gay ethnic identity were those who argued that the concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality were equally oppressive and left no fluidity of choice. There arose within the gay and lesbian community many voices

clamouring to be heard and in one sense deconstructing the notion of a common homosexual identity. This becomes problematic, as Gamson (1995) outlines, as it inevitably means the demise of the identity movement. It is this deconstruction which is generally called 'queer theory'. However, Gamson (1995) rather insightfully points out that the debates between queer theorists and the old liberals are rather similar to previous debates prior to Stonewall. There are of course advantages and disadvantages in an ethnic model of homosexuality in that it allows individuals to be visible and reclaim social spaces, for example the family. However, there is a paradox between essentialist and social constructionist views of ethnicity and identity. Gamson (1995) succinctly encapsulates the essence of the paradox when he writes:

Honoring both sets of insights from the Queer debates is a tall order. It calls for recognizing that undermining identities is politically damaging in the current time and place, and that promoting them furthers the major cultural support for continued damage (Gamson, 1995; 405).

Epstein (1987) reiterates this view and argues that identity politics hands the world a very visible target upon which to vent its wrath.

The debate has yet a long way to run and has profound implications for the lives of gays lesbians and all citizens. The move towards a European style of citizenship and Bill of Rights heralds the arrival of new battles to be fought in the gaining of social spaces. The introduction of the Act in the UK Parliament, to allow gay and lesbian couples the same

partnership rights as heterosexuals, is part of the move towards equality for all citizens regardless of sexuality.

In one form or another in all the previous debates the next topic has raised its head. The essentialist, social constructionist debate has been present since Freud started to write about sexuality. The debate on whether sexuality is an essentialist construct or a social construct is important. The argument for ethnic identity can be defended if sexuality is a fixed construct. On the other hand if sexuality is a social construct then sexuality is viewed as fluid and there are no fixed social categories of sexuality. These ideas do impact on the lives of gays and lesbians. Academic debate may at times appear removed from the everyday realities of people's lives, but the ideas tend to filter into popular culture.

### **3.7 The Social Construction and Essentialism Debate**

The debate between the essentialist theorists and social construction theorists for me produced untold confusion as regards the question of gay identity. It is reassuring to read Gamson (1995) excerpts from the gay press to realise I am not alone. The essentialist, social construction debate is important in that it has an impact not only on societal and individuals' perceptions of homosexuality but also on policy, which included the notion of the gay gene, and which arose partly in response to the fear of a gay backlash as a result of AIDS in an effort to claim the protection of rights, the argument being that if a person is essentially immutably lesbian or gay then that can be viewed in the same way as colour. Thus, one should not be discriminated against on the grounds of sexuality.

Into this debate stepped amongst others Foucault. It can be argued that one of the most powerful developments in the debate on homosexuality in recent times is Foucault's assertion that our deepest-lying sexual categories and feelings are social constructs. He reiterates previous writers' claims of the social nature of homosexuality (McIntosh, 1968 and Simon & Gagnon, 1967). However, he creates from this theoretical beginning a grand historical narrative on sexuality. In his history of sexuality he makes the rather seductive claim that the very category, homosexual, is a social construct, which is scarcely more than a hundred years old. Foucault is arguing that homosexuality has little to do with nature but has arisen because society named it as such. Foucault writes:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy into a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1980; 43).

Homosexuality, then, is a social construct of our own culture, and virtually even of our own century. The drawing together of certain sexual practices, named and given social importance and space, created the category of the homosexual out of which arose explanations of a psychic or biological nature to explain its appearance.

Foucault (1980) adds to the debate by his statement that:



As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrators were nothing more than the judicial subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a life form. Nothing that went into the total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was the secret that gave itself away (Foucault, 1980; 43).

There are two ways of exploring Foucault's contention. 1. Different people naturally have a whole array of different sexual tastes and desires; and what has happened is a categorisation and labelling in such a way that the great divide is established upon the gender of the object of desire, rather than upon its age, colour, or social class. 2. The second which is a more social constructionist view, is that the desires themselves have been socially produced: the category does not just group the desires, it creates them.

Weeks (1981a) writes: 'Social processes construct subjectivities not just as categories, but at the level of individual desires' (Weeks, 1981a; 111).

What Foucault seems to be advocating is that sexual preference may itself be nothing more than a superficial matter of taste and practice. This being true, it is no wonder that the quest to understand the deep cause of homosexual preference has been unsuccessful: it is a quest for something that isn't there. It is, however, deeply unsettling on an individual level to consider that one's most intimate desires are manufactured in this way. Epstein (1987) draws our attention to the issue that this pays very little relation to the realities of individuals' lives. He suggests that a more fruitful discussion away from



essentialism and social construction is to ask: 'How do gays and lesbians interpret their sexual desires and situate themselves in the social world?' (Epstein, 1987; 2).

For Epstein (1987) this debate is a rehash of nature versus nurture and in many ways pointless, as it does not advance the political cause of gays and lesbians.

Fuss (1989) argues that lesbians have not followed the essentialist social constructionist line as they may have more to lose. She considers that there are elements of constructionism and essentialism within all feminist theory. She also argues that there is an element of essentialism within constructionism and vice versa and that this dualism is not contradictory.

Fuss (1991) raises many questions regarding the place of identity politics within lesbian lives. She is critical of the post-modern approach of pluralizing — identities instead of identity — as it does not answer the inherent problems of identity. She argues that one of the major problems is that the unconscious plays a role in the formation of identity and as such creates a politically unstable subject (Fuss, 1995). However, she does acknowledge: 'There must be a sense of identity even though it would be fictitious' (Fuss, 1989; 104).

She relies on Freudian notions of the unconscious and the constant: 'Resistance to identity which is at the heart of psychic life' (Fuss 1989; 104).

Like Simon (1996), Fuss is attempting to deconstruct Freudian analysis. Both Fuss and Simon (1996) acknowledge that Freud's work reflects the concerns of his time. Fuss is particularly scathing of the notion of sexual drive as desire and argues that desire and identification cannot be separated. Her analysis is dependent on literary analysis of Freud's original text unlike Simon's (1996) sociological approach. Both writers take the battle for identification out of the site of the individual and place it firmly within society. Sexual identity and sexual desire are seen to be socially constructed.

Freud, however, gives us a word of warning that there can be no *Weltanschauung* which is defined as:

An intellectual construction that which solves the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place (Freud, 1932; lecture 35; 783).

Neither the essentialists nor the social constructionists have the answer and paradoxically they cannot exist without one another. It is perhaps time to transcend the debate and return to the concerns of everyday people. It is the influence of social constructionism, amongst other factors which led to the advent of the next and current wave of theory, that of queer theory.

### 3.8 The Umbrella of Queer Theory

The next theoretical wave comes under the rubric of queer theory, which involves a diversity of writers (Butler, 1993; Fuss, 1991). I have deliberately called this an umbrella as the philosophical and academic roots of the various writers are diverse. There appears at times very little to hold the collection of writers together. What queer theorists have in common is a move away from a unitary subject to the notion of a plurality of sexualities and towards an examination of social structures, rather than individuals. Some writers have focused on '*How to Bring Your Kids Up as Gay*' (Sedgwick, 1995), while others have explored the constructs of heterosexuality (Halley, 1995).

The difficulty with the Queer theorist is that they are anti-identity in nature. There is no gay or lesbian subject. The work by McIntosh on the homosexual role is from a queer perspective restrictive, as it does not acknowledge the plurality of experiences.

They position themselves against all categorisation and refuse to name the subject. The notion that individuals have agency and can resist dominant constructs appears to be lost. The debate has moved away from the lives of individuals to academic theorising. The criticisms that they posit are valid, as the notion of a unitary identity does exclude and repress differences and moves towards a normalisation of being gay. However, within the hetero/homosexual positioning that queer theorists are so against, there is not a simple privileged oppressed binary. It is not realistic to isolate any axis of social positioning, whether that is gender, race or sexuality. There are also relationships between the different *sexualities*, which may exclude or include individuals. Sexuality exists within

and is a gendered landscape. The individual's knowledge of sexuality must be understood in relation to social practices. Nevertheless a politics of difference have arisen from the ashes of the essentialist, social construction debate. As Seidman (1997) reminds us, despite the criticisms, queer theorists are shaping the next wave of cultural and political thought regarding sexuality.

Queer theorists oppose the binary nature of the homo/hetero divide and argue that any positioning of the homosexual subject leaves this binary in position and as such maintains existing power relations. In short the politics of exclusion remains fixed in place and the space occupied by the homosexual subject is framed by the dominant hetero discourse. They point out that previous notions of liberation and legitimisation of the homosexual subject is reductionist in nature. That is, they preclude any discussion of the body and eroticism except in gender terms. Sedgwick (1990) claims homosexuality should be viewed as a: 'Cultural figure or category of knowledge' (Sedgwick, 1990; 1).

She regards this categorisation as unstable. 'There is no unthreatened or unthreatening theoretical home for a concept of gay or lesbian origins' (Sedgwick, 1990; 79).

Sedgwick's attention is focused on the deconstruction of texts and her writings seek to reveal some of the underlying homophobic attitudes prevalent within America. The problem with this approach is, however, that there is no discussion on what social factors should be taken into account, or any social analysis. It makes interesting reading, but sheds no light. As Seidman (1997) aptly concludes:

They have not articulated their critique of knowledge with a critique of the social conditions productive of such textual figures (Seidman, 1997; 161).

He advocates rather similarly to Freud's view that there is no '*Weltanschauung*' and suggests a pragmatic approach respectful of difference as a way forward, an approach based on ethical standpoints, rather than abstractions and deconstructions and a view I heartily agree with. For without an ethical standpoint the question becomes for whom are academics writing?

What Queer theorists have done, from a multitude of differing perspectives, is to challenge the traditional heterosexist view of society. They have created a fluidity of the subject and allowed diverse voices to be heard. There is no longer a single homosexual coming out story waiting to be uncovered. Nevertheless, in this project they are not the only voices; Plummer (1995) and Simon (1996) from symbolic interactionist positions are espousing similar views whilst exploring social life. The queer position of viewing all sexualities as categories of knowledge is useful in social analysis, but does not go far enough. The social structures that we inhabit require analysis and at present sociologists such as Seidman (1997), Simon (1996) and Plummer (1995) are providing that bridge.

The next step in this review may at first appear backwards, but with all the arguments on deconstruction it is useful to revisit what is being deconstructed, the notion of identity.

### **3.9 Sexuality as Identity: Behaviour and Coming Out**

After all of the arguments against the notion of sexuality as identity there is a danger that some of the insights and work of the identity theorists are dismissed and lost. Those who took the identity theorists perspective, because of political and libertarian reasons, had an ethical stance, unlike the majority of the queer theorists (Seidman 1997). Identity is not just the concern of early theorists, a forgotten avenue of inquiry; because regardless of whether identity is real people interact as if it exists. The next chapter on young people will examine meanings of identity in relation to the work by Erikson, who is responsible for the wide usage of the term.

Cass (1983) reviewed the literature on homosexual identity and discovered a multitude of meanings:

Defining oneself as gay, a sense of self as gay, image of self as a homosexual, the way a homosexual is, and consistent behaviour in relation to homosexual activity (Cass, 1983; 105).

Trying to unravel all of these positions within the literature is problematic. What is more fruitful is to examine how individuals place themselves within these frameworks. How do individuals understand the construction of their homosexual identity? What effect do popular notions, e.g. deviances, have on an individual? An understanding of how writings on gay and lesbian identity have progressed is crucial in informing answers to the above questions.

The early literature on homosexual identity (Troiden, 1989; Cass, 1979) is placed in the social context of management of a stigmatised identity. This identity is viewed as progressing in stages, which includes 'coming out' as a stage where the individual discloses to others. The individuals are socialised within a heterosexual and gendered landscape and during adolescence begin to view himself or herself as homosexual, which is at odds with previous socialisation. This period has been termed 'identity confusion' (Troiden, 1989). The next stage is termed 'identity assumption' followed by 'identity commitment'. This is a developmental approach to the notion of homosexual identity.

My initial reading on homosexual identity began with papers on 'coming out'. The majority took a developmental psychological stance until I read Harry (1993), who put forward the notion that there are structural issues involved in coming out. The process of coming out is usually seen in stages and his paper looks at a model of being out. Motivations for being 'out' include: erotic desires, self-validation, selective coming out, rejections, and these motivations change over time. Herdt's (1992) analysis of coming out found four historically placed groups. His research is based in Chicago using the Horizon Coming-out Group as his sample. This multi-disciplinary approach used questionnaires and interviews on over 200 people. Herdt (1992) argues that each group had particular issues to negotiate due to the cultural and social factors of their time. He identifies the four groups as: 1930s, World War 2 to 1969, 1970 to 1982, and the post-AIDS generation. This important observation reiterates the need for research into the lives of young gays and lesbians as it demonstrates that each new generation has different issues to face due to cultural changes. Davies (1992) revisits coming out and argues that

identifying oneself as gay is a different process than disclosure. He explores the process of coming out, strategies that individuals may adopt, collusion and partial disclosure. He very realistically concludes that for many people sexuality cannot be the main structuring of their identity because of the social spaces they occupy. It is the management of these spaces which is of particular interest, which, unfortunately, he does not expand on.

The identity debates and concerns are still active within modern queer writing. Jenness (1992) explores the differences between social categorisation and personal identity as problematic areas for lesbians. Identity still matters and as we move away from the notion of stages to a more sophisticated understanding of process, we may uncover more issues that affect an individual's life.

At present the theoretical writings on coming out are based on interviews and questionnaires. Herdt (1992) envisages that ethnographic research may be possible in the future if located in coming-out groups.

At the start of this chapter within the discussion on Freud and Mead there were two points of interest which I considered to be worthy of further discussion, the first being the social constructionist and essentialist debates and the second being desire. Desire has been largely absent from the discussion and at this juncture I will discuss desire and the position of the body within the debate on homosexuality.



### **3.10 The Sexual Body: Theory and Practice**

It is perhaps surprising that within the literature on sexuality scant attention is paid to the body. This section by no means purports to cover the place of the body within sociology which is well documented by Frank (1991). There may be several reasons for this strange lack of discussion on the body. The sociologist's gaze has been on sexuality as a social and cultural practice. Their interest has been on how this is reflected in the power and structural practices within a society. For Foucault the body is central as it is what marks us out, how we are classified as people. He introduces the term 'biopolitics' to describe the relationship between bodies and institutions. There are of course many competing paradigms, which try to write about our bodies and shape how we view our bodies. This may allow space for individuals to resist the dominant paradigms. Nevertheless, gender, sexual difference is a dominant 'regulatory force' in relation to our bodies (Foucault, 1979). Butler (1993) explores this further and attempts to find ways to undermine the dominant heterosexual discourse that is written on the body. Her performative theory views the body as a discursive construct held in place by regulatory practices. Her analysis is based on a variety of sources — film, philosophy, literature — and it is problematic to find a way through. However, it is valuable in that it reminds us of the discursive practices of earlier writers, e.g. Freud. Psychology, in the main, has taken a different direction. Their interest, is on how the psyche plays out the conflicting demands, as if all existed in the mind. The result has been some rather disembodied accounts of sexuality that treat the body as a script, or performance (Butler, 1990). Connell (1996) and Simon (1996) are two of the writers that position the body as sexual within writings on sexuality, a feature that is absent from most gay, lesbian and queer theorists I have so

far read. The advent of HIV and AIDS and queer theory may have brought about a realisation that bodies do matter to us (Wilton, 1997). Our bodies age, become ill, feel pleasure and pain, become eroticised. Connell (2002) outlines the three ways in which gender is conceptualised:

The idea of natural difference, which treats the body as a machine; the idea of two separate realms of sex and gender; the idea of gender as a discursive or symbolic system, which treats the body as a canvas on which society paints (Connell, 2002; 30).

The body in essence can become then a symbol of self. Bodies can be both gendered and erotic.

### **3.11 Erotic and Gendered Bodies**

Bodies, as well as being a symbol of self, are a site of judgement. I am judged by my body: my character, my morals are all associated with body shape, e.g. fat equals lazy. One need only look at the hyper-masculinity of sculptured male gay bodies to realise that the manipulation of the body as a sexual image is alive and well. Bodies are, however, rather more than visual cues or constructions that individuals play with mentally. Connell (1987) deals with this very well in his discussion on gender and power. He concludes that:

We may say, then, that the practical transformation of the body in the social structure of gender is not only accomplished at the level of symbolism. It has physical effects on the body; the incorporation is a material one (Connell, 1987; 87).

Connell (1996) returns to the body in his later work on masculinity where he explores not just the physical but the erotic responses of the body. It is refreshing to read grounded accounts of the body and sexual desire based on research. Within this text we are reminded bodies have erotic responses and sometimes these responses may surprise us. On other occasions we may have no name for what it is we feel or at the very least a naïve conception. This is particularly true of homosexual desire, but is also pertinent for the emerging desire of childhood and youth. As Simon (1996) aptly reminds us:

Adolescence is a period of mandated reassessment of the body, with a particular emphasis upon those parts of the body and body contacts that the larger society defines as having erotic significance (Simon, 1996; 91).

At this juncture the individual may not be aware of the social cultural significance of their desires. Considering the complexity of erotic desires it is perplexing that they have been organised primarily around gender choice. The homo/hetero binary, the male/female binary, based on the body, leaves the individual a remarkably restricted space in which to socially enact desire or interpret desire. It is not surprising, that queer theorists find this objectionable. The individual is left trying to accommodate their desires within

the available social structures. Sexuality is a bodily process, our bodies seek relationships. As Simon (1996) reminds us, whether this is with another body also, going through a similar process or with an object, we form sexual relationships. Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts this rather well when he writes:

What we try to possess, then, is not just a body but a body brought to life by consciousness. The importance we attach to the body and contradictions of love are, therefore, related to a more general drama which arises from the metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 166).

Sex and gender may be mapped on the body, but the body also feels them. However, it is important, as Connell reminds us, that this mapping is located within history. This is illustrated by Simon (1996):

That it becomes increasingly possible that individuals separated by a few years or even small differences in their respective histories may experience identical sexual behaviours in vastly different ways and often with vastly different consequences (Simon, 1996; 27).

I would also add that individuals might experience identical sexual behaviours for entirely different motivations or reasons. An analysis, which only focuses on social

practice, does not uncover the multitude of social meaning unless the respondents' inner worlds are explored. The place of the body within sexuality is a burgeoning topic and is entering the sexuality debate albeit gradually.

### **3.12 Body as Performance**

The body has also taken on other meanings in the works of gay and lesbian theorists (Griggers, 1993). Holliday (1999), using a rather different method to explore the body, that of video diaries as opposed to interviews, examines the performance of sexual identities in work, domestic and social spaces. This work introduces the notion of 'comfort' with one's body and its representation.

Comfort...the way in which the identity is mapped on to the body. Comfort means expressing externally what one feels...to close the gap between performance and ontology (Holliday, 1999; 481).

Where this gap is greatest individuals feel discomfort. Individuals, through the external manipulation of their dress, write on their bodies to signify who they are. However, at various junctures, work or social, there are limits placed on individuals in terms of this expression.

The body, as can be seen, is becoming a site of multiple explanations, from performance, expression, eroticism and identity. This entrance of the body is an important development as it opens up new avenues of research, in particular how we map who we are on our

bodies. In gay and lesbian culture dress codes are established phenomena that they may exclude others or act as a means to resist social norms is an important topic. Our bodies are gendered and homosexuality encapsulates both men and women resisting different social practices and expectations.

### **3.13 The Place of the Lesbian: On the Margin or the Front Page?**

In all of the previous discussion on sexuality, lesbianism has rarely been mentioned. I could have added a postscript to each of the relevant sections regarding the place of the lesbian, e.g. a discussion on the lesbian body within the discourse on the body, or Fuss's (1993) deconstruction of Freudian theories of lesbianism. However that would have been to further marginalize the experience of the lesbian. The convention in most literature has been to write as if, homosexual equals gay, equals lesbian or to say this is not the case and write as if it is. Certainly some of the previous discussion does apply to lesbians. Kitzinger (1987) in *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* covers many of the previous points from a lesbian perspective. In addition, many of the female writers who have their roots in feminist lesbian writing (Fuss, Butler) write to a much wider audience. Nevertheless, there are some important differences regarding the experience of being a lesbian, as opposed to being a gay man, and it is these experiences which this section will discuss.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the plethora of lesbian images within the media heralds a new visibility of the lesbian. Who is this lesbian and where can she and even he/she be found? The recent arrival of the pop group Tatu, a manufactured lesbian band

which pushes the boundaries, can paradoxically be seen either as liberating, or a manipulation of lesbians' position in society. It is this juxtaposition of these two facets that has exercised the minds of lesbian theorists. This stems from the social and historical place of lesbianism, a different space than that occupied by gay men.

I previously argued that McIntosh's work led to a re-evaluation of homosexual behaviour and homosexuality as a category, the regulation of homosexuality and the location of homosexuality within heterosexuality. These issues are pertinent for lesbianism in two differing ways than for gay men. Firstly, as will be shown, the historical creation of lesbianism is different from that of gay men. Secondly, the difference between doing lesbian acts and being a lesbian is a personal, as well as political, matter for women. This second premise is explored by Jenness (1992) when she explores the coming out of lesbians. Jenness (1992) argues that an individual's adoption of a lesbian identity depends on:

Detypification', that is the process of redefining and subsequently reassessing the social category of the 'lesbian' such that it acquires increasingly concrete and precise meanings (Jenness, 1992; 66).

She considers that academic writers are as guilty as society in rendering lesbian experiences invisible by the very way they typify lesbianism, a view I certainly shared when lesbian separatist feminism was *de rigueur*.

Stein (1992) charts the decentring of the lesbian community as an exemplar of identity based politics. She argues that initially lesbian feminism had as its grand aim the retaking back of the lesbian space from the medical fraternity. Within this movement there was a move away from compulsory heterosexuality towards the choosing of lesbianism. Stein (1992) argues that the lesbian feminist movement was: 'Torn between fixing lesbianism as a stable minority group and liberating the lesbian in every woman' (Stein, 1992; 50).

From this aim, it is apparent that the seeds of disjuncture have been sown. Similar to the previous discussion on the rise of queer politics, Stein sees this opening up of space as allowing multiple representations of lesbianism and democratising lesbianism to be inclusive to all women.

In a similar vein Griggers (1993) shows how the proliferation of the multiple lesbian images has the effect of *dis-organ-ising* the lesbian body. Who is a lesbian becomes a more problematic question. She utilises Benjamin's analysis in '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*' as the basis of her work. That is: 'Bodies working under a signifying regime of simulation and within an economy of repetition' (Griggers, 1993; 180).

What she is arguing is that there was no initial unique lesbian body to start with. What has transpired is that lesbianism has been encapsulated within all other representations in order to maintain the masculine hegemony of power. She cites the growth of lesbian porn, in particular sex toys such as the dildo, as reinforcing the phallus as a site of male



power. There is an inherent paradox, on the one hand lesbians are free to express a multitude of new ways of being, yet these new ways are not so much new but a bringing into the mainstream of the lesbian. It is ironic that within this discourse she fails to remember that the lesbian prior to the 60s was a source of erotic pornography and as such many women in their seventies regard the word lesbian in this light and not a source of identity (Kitzinger 1987). She concludes that the challenge to lesbianism within this post-modern age is to make the multiple sites of the lesbian body work in dismantling the hegemonic power of both heterosexuality and masculinity.

The issues for lesbians within queer politics are similar to those of gay men, a decentring of the subject, but there is a danger that by re-identifying all lesbians as queer they will be lost, yet again, in occupying a social space.

If lesbians are to survive we cannot let our political agenda be swallowed by either the male gay movement or the heterosexual feminist movement (Whisman, 1996; 125).

The question can be raised as to what social spaces are occupied by lesbians. Esterberg (1996) bemoans the lack of empirical data on lesbian lives in contrast to the plethora of theorising and deconstruction and tries to readdress the balance. Her study of lesbian women within a community explores lesbian identities. She uses Butler's (1990) notion of performative identities as her theoretical framework. The data covers such diverse topics as what lesbians look like, to not looking like a lesbian. What is clear from the

accounts is that performative identities involve a complex to and fro between boundaries, in which lesbians use artefacts from the heterosexual world for their own purposes. Lesbian social spaces are both the same and yet different from the spaces occupied by other women. She ends on a note of caution: that all lesbian performances exist within a larger institutional context, which requires to be understood.

A review by Schneider and Dalton (1996) was able to cite only six lesbian researchers doing sociological research on lesbians. Kitzinger (1987) is one of the women who have done sociological research on lesbianism.

Kitzinger (1987) interviewed 120 women in and around London. She used a 23-item questionnaire and analysed her data using Q-methodology. Q-methodology is a form of factor analysis, which reveals groups of responses. This rather complex procedure does bring useful insights on lesbians' views of their identities. What is evident is the multiplicity of positions that women use to define themselves as lesbian. Kitzinger's premise is that:

The recent liberal humanistic so-called gay affirmative research far from being a liberating force represents a new development in the oppression of lesbians (Kitzinger, 1987; 178).

This so-called gay affirmative research is oppressive as it substitutes one depoliticised construction with another. Kitzinger ends her book by mapping out how lesbian studies

should proceed. She puts forward five tasks. In many ways she is advocating the mantle that queer theorists have adopted. That is: 'The deconstruction of the epistemological position of social science' (Kitzinger, 1987; 188).

Kitzinger (1987) argues that the reflexive process of research, the interpretation and above all the ethics and values of the researcher are important. The plea for visible ethical positions is one that Seidman (1997) makes ten years later. It may be that the advent of Queer theory has torn down her much hated liberal humanism, but there may be even more harmful constructs that have arisen in its place. I would tend to agree with previous writers that the lesbian body is in danger of being dis-organ-ised. It is becoming all things to all people and is in danger of being lost once again to history. Lesbians require to make their voices heard amongst not only the establishment but also amongst queer activists.

### **3.14 Situating the Homosexual: A Conclusion**

This chapter on the theorising of homosexuality commenced with the move away from the question as to what causes homosexuality to an examination of why there was a preoccupation with that question. The literature moved towards the invention of the homosexual, the social construction of the category. The question has now changed and could be said to be where is the homosexual? Is there such a thing as the homosexual? These questions raise for me some disquiet because, if there is no subject, no self, how then are the everyday concerns of those who engage in same-sex relations heard? Regardless of how homosexuality is constructed individuals are embodied. They have feelings, desires, worries and enacted social lives. An understanding of the nature of the

society, the power relations, and the ways in which a society and its citizens are constructed can help to dismantle walls, but it is not the whole story. Individuals are not discursive texts, neither are individuals an empty page. The argument becomes one in which if, as theorists, we take a post-modern view of the death of the subject then we undermine the political struggles of all citizens. Individuals are reflexive, have agency and have notions of selfhood and, limited as this may be, to throw it all out leaves an ethical and political void. As Benhabib (1992) writes about feminism, her arguments can equally be applied to sexuality: 'For we as women have much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the other' (Benhabib, 1992; 230).

Individual citizens do matter and it is perhaps through the medium of telling stories, as theorists we can make the links between the lives of the citizens and the structures that require dismantling.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Changing Worlds and Representations of Young People**

Things Mortal Still Mutable

Things are uncertain; and the more we get,  
The more on icy pavements we are set.  
(Herrick, Robert 1591b-1674d)

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In order to understand some of the experiences of young gays and lesbians the changing social landscape they inhabit requires some explanation. Furlong & Cartmel (1997) contend that young people today face many more challenges and risks in their daily lives, that were unheard of for their parents. They utilise the theoretical writings of Beck (1992), Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991). This chapter explores some of these underlying changes within society, which affect young people. The chapter also examines the literature on the different theoretical representation of young people. The chapter concludes by discussing some of the research on young gays and lesbians.

#### **4.2 Changing Social Worlds**

Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have all written analyses of the overall changes in society. Society is said to have changed from a highly structured, class and industrial society, into one in which old structures are dismantled and the individual is free to construct new social biographies and lifestyles. This argument posits that the old certain ways of defining self and others through class and thus occupation, family and political affiliation, are now redundant (Beck & Beck-

Gernsheim, 2002). Thus, individuals are perceived to be now living in a dynamic uncertain social world, full of risks in which personal individual action is perceived to determine position and outcome within this fluid society. That is not to say that the notion of structures is now redundant, but that there exist numerous possibilities to create multiple self-biographies. Class and occupation are said to no longer solely define individuals (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Giddens (1991) argues this is partly because of media globalisation, the fall of experts and the segmentation of society. Within this society, the position of the individual, as Giddens (1991) argues, becomes one of: 'A self, which is a reflexive project, which involves past and future, and is continuous' (Giddens, 1991; 74).

Thus with the demise of old structures the possibilities for new or revised structures appear and new and revised modes of being. It is not clear from Giddens' (1991) work whether all members of a society are equally able to take advantage of this dismantling, or whether it is to all people's advantage. The contention is that man is autonomous within his environment. All of this change has an impact on young people and Furlong & Cartmel (1997) contend that this creates: 'A future which is seen as filled with risk and uncertainty, in such circumstances it can be difficult to maintain a stable identity' (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; 41). Young people are then faced with negotiating their relationships within the family and with society.

### 4.3 The Changing Family

The family is a space where biology and culture meet, thus creating a natural space for myth to arise. The powerful popular notion of the breakdown of the family and subsequent moral panic can be said to exert contradictory pressures on young people. There is a contradictory message, on the one hand individuals are free to form new attachments and versions of self and yet the ideal family of mother, father and two children is held up as a gold standard, even though there are numerous variations of family life.

Giddens (1992) also does not acknowledge that within this demise of structures there may appear a rigidity of structure, a rise for example in fundamentalism. In addition, the focus on individualisation pays no attention to gender and sexuality power imbalances within relationships. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) more recently chart the trajectory of the *post-familial family* and chart a historical change in the family from the beginnings of the welfare state to feminism, to multi-culturalism and conclude: 'It is not that the traditional family is disappearing but that it is losing its monopoly' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; 98).

They argue that, in addition, the new family structures which are appearing have fewer bonds to hold them together. They cite as the evidence for this claim the high rate of marital separations. As Jamieson (1998) argues it may not just be a matter of lack of intimacy, but other factors such as social networks or lack of economic ties that mitigate against the new forms of cohabitation.

The question remains as to what changes are occurring in the family lives of young people. Haskey's (1991) exploration of demographic changes found that 25% of young people under 16 lived in single parent families. The 1992 General Household survey uncovered the changing family structure in that only 40% of the population lived in the traditional two-parent family and that this included those who had remarried. As Watney (1987) reminds us, gay people grow up in families too and these changes may impact on their lives. The increase in one-parent families does have economic implications for the future independence of the children. Young people from single households or disadvantaged backgrounds marry earlier and have children earlier (Dimnock, 1997). The changing patterns of family life may open up new possibilities for gay and lesbian adults and Weston (1991) charts the emergence of new kinship arrangements. However, for the young gay and lesbian, the situation may be different. As Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) succinctly write:

Whereas in pre-industrial society the family was mainly a community of need held together by an obligation of solidarity, the logic of individually designed lives has come increasingly to the fore (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; 97).

This change in family life towards individualisation opens up new power struggles and redefinitions of position for all members of the family. My tentative conclusion would be that paradoxically this might in some social spheres diminish young people's ability to reach self-determination as their area of social responsibility is now contested rather than



mapped out. Although clearly defined social boundaries can on the one hand be viewed as restrictive, they do have an advantage in that a young person is aware of the walls that are required to be broken and where to direct one's energy. When all is contested, and I would suggest that the struggle to map out one's place in society moves between the internal reflexive possibilities and the external structural demands of individualisation, then competing paradigms are more problematic for the young. Self-determination involves not only social and economic capital, but also the necessary interpersonal negotiation skills. Knowledge of the possibilities that a person may choose from by its self is not sufficient to ensure change. It is this conundrum that faces the youth of today, coupled with the realisation that they are not the only group contesting social spaces. In one sense the youth are in competition for power with other members of the family. There are of course other pressures that exert influence on young people's position in society.

The changing economic picture from the 70s, changeable work practices, increases in house prices and the demise of a job for life may have had the effect of increasing the number of young people in higher education and still living at home, as seeking employment may be difficult and accommodation too expensive. The net effect may be to increase the length of youth and to delay social independence. This may be a problematic state of affairs, if one is gay or lesbian, and the family is unaware of the sexuality of the young person, as their social independence may be curtailed. This delay can be problematic for all young people; an indicator of this tension faced by young people is the changing suicide rates. The suicide rates for young men rapidly increase over the age

of 21. It is at this time they feel they should be independent with their own family and home, yet are economically unable to do so. Correspondingly the suicide rates for gays and lesbians are at a younger age (Remafedi *et al*, 1991), suggesting they feel trapped earlier. The discussion of the mental health effects of these social changes is examined later in the thesis.

#### **4.4 The Information Age**

Perhaps one of the changes that is most noticeable since the 70s is the advent of the information age. It is this change that affects everyone, not just youth, and because of that one could tentatively suggest that interpretations of the perceived benefits and disadvantages have been viewed through adult eyes with scant regard to youth. As an individual working within an academic institution where the pursuit of knowledge is one of the core activities, increased information has a seductive quality that at times blinds me to the inherent problems of overload. It is apparent to me, when at times I am forced to evaluate how I can utilise all this new information, that I am at least equipped with a framework of study. I am not in the position of a young person trying to establish self whilst being bombarded with information. This increase in the globalisation of information has gone hand in hand with a rise in consumerisation, cultural diversity and awareness and the opening up of mass foreign travel. There has been a burgeoning of new media representations of gays and lesbians; only recently, two policemen kissed on the popular TV programme *The Bill*. Is this another taboo broken? Gaytime television, confessional chat shows, the telling of life stories and the voyeuristic *Big Brother*<sup>3</sup> provide us with new ways of being and allow us to engage in others' lives from a safe

distance. Eggermont (2005) explored the role of television on young adolescents' perceptions of peer sexual behaviour. Although the study focused on heterosexual sexual behaviour, he found that the impact of television on young people's sexual behaviour and opinions was minimal. It was significant in that television's influence on sexual matters extended to 12 year olds and as yet the long-term effect of this influence was yet to be ascertained. The burgeoning of information is a radical change from past life experiences, but this process of change has a long history where each link in the chain has had an effect on the social lives of gays and lesbians. When I compare my experiences of entering a gay and lesbian social world with those who did it 60 years ago, a more formalised story appears from the past. A respondent in a previous study recounted that his entrance to the gay scene was by private introduction to an elite circle (Robertson & Hutcheson, 1995). The opening up of gay and lesbian social spaces to heterosexuals and the liberalisation of heterosexual social spaces may have had the advantage of de-ghettoising gays and lesbians, but paradoxically it may make social spaces more confusing and anxiety provoking for the young. Seidman, Meeks & Trachen (1999) argue the need to modernise the meaning of the closet to accurately reflect the changing social lives of gays and lesbians in the now post identity era. Their focus was on adults who are normalising their life experiences. Although I concur that the closet is on one level being dismantled, I think as a result of the dismantling of the public/private division in everyday life, there still exist private closets in the minds of the youth. The coming out story of young gays and lesbians still holds a powerful cathartic influence and whether that necessity will diminish in the future is open to debate. This is a debate that I will return to within the discussion of my data.

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<sup>3</sup> A television programme where contestants live in a house that is constantly on live television.

#### **4.5 Changing Images of Young People**

The previous discussion on homosexuality impacts on the work by theorists on young people in a myriad of ways, not least the work of Freud on the early developmentalists. However, there is relatively scant work on young people, which has queered the pitch, or taken a social constructionist view. The bulk of the work takes a psychological perspective when examining homosexuality and young people.

Griffin (1993) writes that youth is treated as a key indicator of the state of the nation. How we perceive our youth reflects the economic, social and cultural life of the nation. The youth are the future on which our hopes, fears and fantasies rest. She goes on to discuss how youths are represented as either at risk or problematic. This idea of youth as a mirror that reflects society which, according to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) is in a state of individualisation, led me to consider how youth are now represented.

#### **4.6 Contradictory Messages**

I am always struck by the notion of age when I read about the lives of historical characters e.g. Marie-Antoinette married at 13, or when I open a paper and read about 13 year old Angolan soldiers. I compare this to my friend's children going to school, playing Gamecubes<sup>4</sup> and being harangued to tidy their room. I find it more perplexing when I read about how children are growing up more quickly now; they have lost the innocence of youth. I suspect that what adults are bemoaning is the loss of ignorance amongst the youth as a result of the new technologies of information. Adults' view of and

relationships with youth have without doubt changed. However, what has remained constant is the view of youth as a specific time period in an individual's lifespan. Although youth is marked out as within a specific age range, the boundaries are now more blurred. The transition from youth to adult does not occur at one specific age. The age at which society considers its citizens responsible varies and is dependent on legal and social mores. To give a few well-known examples, at 16 a person can marry, leave school; at 17 drive a car, at 18 votes and drink alcohol.

On reflection the contradictory messages that are transmitted to youth concerning what they are allowed to do and when, creates a journey from youth to adulthood composed of a haphazard set of hoops and jumps. Whether these are arranged with purely the best interest of the youth in mind is debatable and they are more likely to be as a result of economic and political pressures. However, the net result is that society's perception of youth is full of contradictory messages and expectations. I would suggest that young people's attention is not primarily focused on adults, as research by Griffin (1993) clearly demonstrates the importance of peers. Adults' credibility is severely undermined when the messages they transmit don't make sense. The concept of adolescence is one that many stake a claim to, parents, advertisers, academics and health professionals. They all present to the adolescent various and competing versions of what it is to be an adolescent, whilst almost universally forgetting this was a space that they once occupied. Today's adolescent, it could be argued, requires a greater degree of skill to adapt to and defend themselves from the competing paradigms.

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<sup>4</sup> A Nintendo game machine.

#### **4.7 Adolescence or Youth**

It is hardly surprising that society's representations and perceptions of youth are in a state of flux when the academic literature on youth reflects the same paradoxes. It becomes apparent rather quickly that there is a tension between the developmental psychological framework, sociological frameworks and anthropological cultural frameworks when researching youth, identity and sexuality. As Simon (1996) argues:

The very tendency of contemporary social science theory has been to create abstract formalisms that obscure this pluralism of experience, as such theories seek to discover transcendent uniformities in the "socio" logics and "psycho" logics of behaviour (Simon, 1996; 12).

This makes the task of creating a rounded picture of the field problematic. The first and most obvious difference when one reads the theoretical literature is that the psychological based accounts of young people refer to them as adolescents.

Adolescence is based on the notion of psychological and biological stages, which occur during the developmental stages of child to adult. It was first invented by Hall (1904) and was used to mark out the psychological and biological changes that occurred in young people from the onset of puberty. One could argue that adolescence has been constructed and extended due to changing social expectations of young people, whence in the past the transition from child to adult, as a result of short life expectancy and economic demands

was almost overnight. The net result is that adolescence becomes a stage of contradictory social expectations and variant levels of power.

Adolescence is usually conceptualised as a period of transitions, an oft-used word in the literature, meaning the potential for reorganisation and behavioural change. In addition Rutter (1994) considered that there were points in one's life where one made major decisions, which altered one's subsequent behaviour: 'turning-points'. The concept of transitions is not solely behavioural and social changes, but also incorporates biological, hormonal and cognitive changes within the adolescent. These are discussed in terms of developmental stages, which assume satisfactory completion of each stage culminating in adulthood (Erikson, 1959). It is hardly surprising that subsequent research in this field approaches identity and sexuality in the same developmental stages approach.

The biological thrust is apparent in the research on puberty and hormonal changes, a rather complex field, in which to date no conclusive evidence has been found to suggest this has had any direct result on subsequent sexual activity or orientation (Bem, 1996). This is not an area, due to the inconclusive nature of the results, that I shall explore in depth, but will reiterate Simon's (1996) position that the problem is that the direction of the research may be misguided in its attempt to find an all encompassing answer to sexual development. What can be said to be beyond doubt is that between six and 16 years old, dependent on gender, girls usually earlier than boys, young people undergo hormonal changes that start the menarche for girls and the spermarche for boys, leading to reproductive status. This leads to external physical changes, and internal emotional



change. These changes have both social and personal expectations and are a significant landmark in a young person's life.

The sociological concept of youth and the study of young people develop an entirely different research and historical focus relying less on the study and conceptualisation of individual differences of young people, than on groups and socialisation. Major concepts in the field of sociology e.g. roles, constructivism, gender, sexuality and post modernism have all in some way influenced the study of young people. The usual method of study as opposed to the psychological testing of young people is qualitative research conducted in schools or clubs. Ethnographic research was not an option open to my research in that the only areas I could have conducted the research was at all gay and lesbian youth spaces and that would not have given a complete picture. I initially assumed that young gay and lesbians were cocooned from the influences described within the ethnographic texts, that of gender and heterosexuality. I was also taking for granted that sexuality was the main identifying force of the young people and that all else was in relationship to their sexuality. However, it was difficult at times to conceptualise how some of the research results applied to young gays and lesbians. This was compounded as most of the research focuses on one gender. Two examples of this approach are Hey (1997) *The Company She Keeps*, about girls' friendships and Mac an Ghaill (1994) *The Making of Men, Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling* that are discussed in relation to friends and family.



#### 4.8 Youth and Identity

Examining the literature on identity and young people raises several fundamental issues, which require further discussion before the major theorists are explored. For the purposes of this section identity will be examined from a developmental psychological perspective and some of the main theoretical thrusts will be discussed. The majority of developmental psychology writings about young people's '*identity*' have their roots firmly within the Freudian psychoanalytical tradition. The influence of Freudian analysis on the notion of identity spreads through art, literature and all academic writings on identity.

It may strike the reader as anomalous that in a mainly sociological analysis of young people there is a section devoted to developmental psychology. However, it is these very constructs that have been used to explain the existence of young gays and lesbians and maybe more importantly utilised in a therapeutic way. By which I mean that any professional contact by a young gay or lesbian through the education service will inevitably lead to the application of these constructs.

The notion of identity as a developmental sequence where an individual travels through clearly delineated stages towards a fully integrated sense of self with a normal functioning personality in some accounts neglects two crucial assumptions. Firstly, there is an assumption that there may be an end point to the establishment of identity and secondly, therefore, that the identity is then fixed. Arching both these positions is the overall assumption that there is a normal outcome and thus the possibility of abnormal or deviant progression and outcome. These assumptions form the basis of the

conceptualisation of personality within the psychiatric services. Although there are differences between North America and Europe, generally speaking diagnostic manuals view personality as a matrix of characteristics that can be measured qualitatively or quantitatively.

This way of classifying people has led to the creation of new forms of pathology, e.g. self-defeating personality disorder is applied to women who live with abusive husbands and don't leave. The purpose of drawing attention to this way of conceptualising personality and identity is to remind the reader that young people may come in contact with this framework if they are referred to the mental health services. Homosexuality is no longer a personality disorder; however, the Diagnostical Statistical Manual IV matrix (DSM IV)<sup>5</sup> has the effect of dividing individuals into segments. For each segment, whether it is behaviour, affect or cognition, a judgement is made as to whether what is exhibited is normal/abnormal or appropriate/inappropriate in relation to the general populace. This is problematic if one is a young gay or lesbian and therefore not part of the majority of the general heterosexual populace. What is viewed as normal is based on an assumption of heterosexuality. It is important to add that the matrix is devised without recourse to age, gender, sexuality ethnicity or context. The net result tends to lead to a focus on the pathologies, either behavioural or emotional, of young gays and lesbians. That is not to say that young gays and lesbians fare better under a purely developmental approach to identity. I shall give a brief account of the works of some of the influential theorists.

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<sup>5</sup> The DSM IV is the classification manual of all mental health problems as used by predominantly North American psychiatrists and researchers to reach a diagnosis.

Erikson is an important theorist to examine in relation to the development of adolescent identity as it is his theories and the development of his theories that have been mainly applied to young gays and lesbians, in relation to sexual orientation and subsequent problems (Harstein, 1996; Hettrick & Martin, 1987; Taylor & Remafedi, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1994; Rotheram-Borus *et al*, 1994; and Zera, 1992).

Erikson (1963) although having a strong Freudian traditional approach to the development of identity in young people, does acknowledge the influence of social factors and views identity formation as a balancing act between self and other. This comes to fruition within the period of adolescence, which is the fifth stage in Erikson's eight-stage sequence of development. Erikson (1959) conceptualises personality development as life-long. Erikson also parts company with Freud as he moves away from the interplay of id, ego and super ego. Primarily, Erikson's focus is on ego and the interaction ego has with the social world from which comes meaning and coherence. This use of the term ego has a wider meaning than that ascribed by Freud. Erikson views ego as incorporating ego-identity, a view of self that develops through the interaction of social, cultural and historical influences on the individual (Erikson, 1956). The roots of a person's identity are said to develop from the childhood mechanisms of introjection and identification, leading to identity formation in adolescence.

The final identity, then as fixed at the end of adolescence, is super-ordinated to any single identification with individuals of the past: it includes all significant

identifications but also alters them to make a unique and reasonably coherent whole (Erikson, 1968; 161).

This process, as described by Erikson (1959) as 'epigenesis', conveys the meaning of layers built upon layers forming with each addition a complete new whole. Thus, at adolescence the individual reaches identity formation through the process of identity versus role confusion. Again at this point Erikson (1968) parts company with Freud regarding the influence of biological sexual maturation. Erikson regards the psychosocial influence at this juncture to be very important. He surmises that a young person can be biologically capable of sexual relations, but not yet emotionally or socially able to embark on a relationship. The young person, in Erikson's view, moves towards developing intimacy; a state that cannot be attained until identity is resolved. Given that Erikson views the task of identity formation as being affirmed by and affirming the social order, this raises questions as to the position of young gays and lesbians as discussed by Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer (2001). They raise several interesting points in their discussion of the literature on the developmental trajectories of young gays and lesbians.

There has been little focus on whether there is a heightened or early self-awareness, increased maturity or independence, or increased self esteem for being able to negotiate the norms in more than one social world simultaneously (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001; 118).

At present most of the research focuses on problematic behaviours or discrimination, (Hammelman, 1993; Harris & Bliss, 1997), and the environmental factors and adjustments of young gays and lesbians have been largely neglected.

The work of Erikson has been developed by Marcia (1980). What is of note in her work is the notion of identity status. Several types of identity status are identified, each with specific characterisations. The group of individuals who are unable to make identity commitments are labelled as '*diffusions*'. What is apparent from this group is that they have the highest incidence of loneliness, suicide and hopelessness. This reiterates that there is an enormous personal cost for young people who are unable, as the result of the social setting they inhabit, to engage in close and intimate relationships. Further research by Zimmermann & Becker-Stoll (2002) on attachment representations and the influence of ego-identity status during adolescence reported that attachment representation remained stable during the ages of 16 to 18 years old. Attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1980) is said to be a biologically driven security-regulation system which in times of distress for a child or young person is activated and they seek out security and comfort from significant others. The quality of support given to the child or young person determines the development of a healthy personality and the ability to overcome adversity later in life. The achievement of ego-identity status in adolescence is related to the emotional support offered by parents and significant others (Zimmerman & Becker-Stoll, 2002). This again reiterates Marcia's (1980) study that good quality relationships are essential for the development of a stable personality.

A rather different approach away from the psychoanalytical development of ego and the accent on normal heterosexual sexual development as the resolution is the work of Loenvinger (1987): 'Untying what I am from what I ought to be opens up the way for beginning to differentiate one's real and ideal self' (Loenvinger, 1987; 228).

Loenvinger's work is based on a mass of clinical data and what she found was that conformity was how most adults and adolescents dealt with problems of identity. However, what is not clear is how individuals move from conformity to realisation of an ideal self, an issue taken up by other theorists (Cote, 1996).

Neither a purely sociological framework nor a developmental psychology framework adequately explains how individuals maintain and produce identities within differing social contexts. Some attempts have been made to pull these theoretical strings together in the field of adolescents. Coleman (1974) developed the focal model as a result of extensive research on young people at the ages of 11, 13, 15 and 17 years old. He explored a variety of different relationships that adolescents have, in addition researching self image and being alone. The model proposes that the context in which development takes place influences the development of relationship patterns. One of the main features of this theory is the resolution of a developmental task or issue is not essential to the tackling of another developmental task. The net result is that adolescents may face several developmental issues simultaneously. The model therefore does not assume that there is a set sequence of developmental stages that each adolescent has to progress through. Coleman (1974) identified several themes that were more important to the

adolescents at specific ages. He identified that adolescent concerns with peer friendships were more prominent in middle adolescence whilst concerns with parental relationships were a priority in later adolescence. Coleman's (1974) theory moved away from previous conceptualisations of adolescence as being a period of 'storm' and 'stress' to one whereby adolescents are able to choose which problems they wish to focus on. One of the criticisms of this model is that economic stressors are not taken into account. Kloep (1999) researched a large sample of 1217 Swedish adolescents between the ages of 11 and 20 years old. She found that the issues young people faced were similar to Coleman's (1974) study and that there is a relationship between mental well-being and the number of issues a young person has to handle. She was critical however, of how much choice a young person had in deciding on which problems to focus on.

Young people can neither choose their parents, the social class they belong to or the society they live in, factors that can bring about a whole range of compounded problems that have to be dealt with (Kloep, 1999; 62).

She argues that most problems that are faced by young people are interconnected and she gives the example of how economic status influences social status and friendship patterns. She also raises the problem that young people may not have access to skills that would help in problem solving and tackling their developmental issues. Research undertaken by Hendry *et al* (1996) in Scotland, using the focal model as a framework, did not find many differences with adolescent concerns when related to family and social background. They did however find that socioeconomic factors were linked to leisure

activities and relationships. 'Youth unemployment and non-employment is associated with a "disrupted" pattern of relational concerns and leisure activities' (Hendry *et al*, 1996; 320).

Their research did highlight some gender differences in leisure activities, young female adolescents tend to stop using neighbourhood support systems earlier and faster than young male adolescents. Young male adolescents tend to utilise bars and clubs more often than young adolescent females. From a different theoretical perspective Cote (1996) explores the interrelation of social identity: an individual's position in society, 'personal identity'; an individual's interactions and 'ego identity'; and a subjective sense of self. He draws on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to formulate the concept of identity capital to describe:

The wherewithal individuals use when engaging in transactions as they attempt to negotiate the tricky passages created by the obstacles of late-modern society (Cote, 1996; 424).

This ties in with self-monitoring (Synder, 1974) and situated identities (Gecas & Burke, 1995) as ways in which an individual may operate. Cote (1996) argues that this theoretical construct can be used to generate research questions to explore how an individual invests in self.



Various writers (Goossens & Phinney, 1996) discuss the issue of how to research context and identity. Ramstrom (1991) describes 'individuation' as the period in adolescence where one explores the question of 'who am I' and 'am I the same person all of the time'. In tandem with 'individuation' the adolescent explores integration. Integration can be seen as social and existential, that is how one relates to others as well as concepts such as what is normal social function. Bosma *et al* (1994) conceptualise identity as: 'The relationship between core and context, always intrinsically related to development' (Bosma *et al*, 1994; 596).

Adamson & Lyxell's (1996) research into self concept argued that the process of integration may be seen as the main issue of late adolescence. They further found that adolescents with unstable self concepts were more liable though not exclusively, to have suicidal thoughts and low self esteem.

There are inherent difficulties in reviewing the developmental theorists, not least that there is a distinct lack of longitudinal studies, but there are problems in measuring how change takes place. What is apparent in the majority of theorists is that the gay and lesbian youth is absent and it has to be remembered at the time of some of the early writings homosexuality was still considered a psychiatric illness. However, what is clear is that young people, regardless of sexuality, who fail for whatever reason to establish a coherent sense of self, are at risk of suicidal ideation. Previous discussion focused on the changing nature of our society and the possibilities for new ways of being that may be all right for individuals with a coherent sense of self, who can then pick and choose. There

remains, however, a question about how a young person who does not know who they are, may approach the myriad of possibilities in a safe manner. What is apparent from the research papers on young people and identity is the attempt to broaden out the disciplinary base of social psychology to include sociological concepts. The problem is that different aspects of the self are formulated from different theoretical positions and unless there is some bringing together of different theoretical positions the picture that emerges from the research is a fragmentary picture of young people's lives.

#### **4.9 Gay and Lesbian Youth Research**

It would be depressing to consider that gay and lesbian youth research reflected Griffin's (1993) assertion that the nature of the research into young people reflects society's view of young people. The majority of gay and lesbian youth research deals with problematic behaviours, either their own behaviour or others' behaviour towards them.

Some research, mostly North American, explores issues of the development of sexual identity amongst gay and lesbian young adults (Zera, 1992). The majority of studies are retrospective, involving adults, and use a developmental approach (Zera, 1992; Troiden, 1989). This is problematic in as much as respondents may structure their experiences to give coherence to self and may give no sense of how they achieved that sense of self. They are also historical in nature and take no account of the changing social attitudes. The advent of HIV and AIDS, in terms of public discourse about sex, may also have had an effect on young gay and lesbian adults, which previous research did not need to take into account.

The multitude of media representations of homosexuality and the 'pink pound' and the identification of gay areas within cities produce a different social milieu for young gay and lesbians in the 90s, than those of the 70s, who are the majority of the research subjects. Simon (1996) theorises that individuals may view and experience identical sexual behaviours in different ways as a result of age or personal life history.

A large bulk of gay and lesbian research has been in the area of mental health, in particular the issue of suicide. This research is North American and was conducted by the Hettrick-Martin Institute an organisation devoted to gay and lesbian youth. Among the many issues they report are:

a) Half of lesbian and gay youths reported in a 1987 study that their parents rejected them for being gay; b) 1 in 4 lesbian and gay youths are forced to leave home because of their orientation; c) half of gay/bi male youths are forced into prostitution to survive; d) 80% of lesbian and gay youths reported severe isolation (Hettrick & Martin, 1987; 10).

In a 1987 study, 'The Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide', US Dept of Health and Human Services, (1989), found that lesbian and gays constitute up to 25% of all homeless youths; and that suicide was the leading cause of death among lesbian and gay and transgendered youths. The lesbian and gay youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Lesbian and gays account for 30%

of completed suicides among youths. This is borne out by research by Remafedi *et al* (1991) and Hammelman (1993) showing that suicide attempts usually occurred after the youth had labelled himself a homosexual. Rivers & Carragher (2003) explored the social and developmental factors affecting gay and lesbian youth in the UK. Their research also compared some of the findings in the UK with that of the United States of America. The research found that although suicide ideation was common amongst young lesbians and young gay men, suicide rates were not higher than that of young heterosexuals. Other research by Savin-Williams (1994) explored verbal and physical abuse as stressors in the lives of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths and included associations with school problems, running away, substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide. This study concludes that:

Although the causal link ... has not been scientifically established, there is suggestive evidence that these outcomes are consequences of verbal and physical harassment (Savin-Williams, 1994; 5).

Various writers (Morrow, 1997, Jordan *et al*, 1997 and Malinsky, 1997) have documented the effects of homophobia on identity. There are numerous difficulties facing the young gay and lesbian teenager in the educational setting, least of all the lack of acknowledgement of their existence. Ellis & High (2004) explored young gay and lesbians experiences at secondary school and compared their results with earlier research by Trenchard & Warren, (1984). They found that although homosexuality was discussed

within the school environment more often than in 1984, the discussion was still seen as unhelpful by the young people in their study. They in addition reported that:

Some curriculum treatments of homosexuality may have actually reinforced the marginalisation of young people who identified as lgb (Ellis & High, 2004; 223).

All writers tend to conclude that the lack of positive role models, the silence and overt homophobia are detrimental to the mental health of the young gay and lesbian youth. Warwick *et al* (2001) further conclude that the lack of positive anti-discriminatory practices within schools relating to gay and lesbian students was detrimental to their mental health. This may lead to self-damaging behaviours. Counselling involves the debunking of many of the homophobic myths that the young people may have incorporated into self and yet Gay affirmative counselling is not mainstream and within counselling books about adolescents (Geldard & Geldard, 1999) the gay and lesbian teenager remains unacknowledged.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

Young people's lives have been re-conceptualised away from purely developmental constructs towards an analysis of societal change and uncertainty. The focus of inquiry moves towards an analysis of the relationships a young person has to make in order to navigate the dynamic landscape they find themselves in. According to Furlong & Cartmel (1997): 'Individuals are constantly forced to engage with the consequences of their actions on a subjective level' (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; 37).

The effects of the negotiation and the capacity to navigate or even the types of landscape that a young person may have to navigate are not identical for all young people. The negotiation of sexuality places a further obstacle in the path of young people. It is important to take into account when trying to uncover how young people negotiate their way in the world, the influence of culture, gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity. These structures have not disappeared and in the words of Furlong & Cartmel (1997):

Some of the problems faced by young people in modern Britain stem from an attempt to negotiate on an individual level. Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; 114).

Young gays and lesbians may face a more problematic transition from adolescence to adulthood as they encounter the deep-seated heteronormativity prevalent in society. This will become more apparent during the data and discussion chapters.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Young People and their Relationships**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses some of the literature on young people's friendships and relationships with their parents. The literature includes sociological ethnographic accounts within the school setting and social psychology accounts. The chapter also includes a discussion on sexual relationships. Particular attention is paid to research studies that utilise both sociological and psychological theories in the study of young people's friendships. The chapter starts with a review of some of the research into gay and lesbian friendships.

#### **5.2 Friendships: Gay and Lesbian**

What friends are and how we form friendships have been discussed by Fehr (1996). She outlines four conditions: 'environmental', 'individual', 'situational' and 'dyadic'. In other words who we have contact with, how the other fits with our idea of a friend and emotional involvement.

Surprisingly what appears to be lacking overall from most of the research is an examination of gay and lesbian young people's lives, in particular friends. I was unable to find any literature on gay and lesbian young people's friendships or dating patterns.

This is surprising in that Altman (1982) wrote:

Both the lack of marriage and the exclusion from the heterosexual world of conventional families tend to make friendship all the more important for homosexuals (Altman, 1982; 189).

I did however find one study that exclusively focused on adult gay and lesbian friendships; that compared lesbian and gay men's same sex relationships and a study of gay men's friends by Nardi (1999). This research, based on interviews of 30 gay men, utilised e-mail as a method of data collection. The research included 160 questionnaires. Nardi (1999) acknowledges that the majority of his sample was white, middle class, urban gay men and that the results may not be generalisable to other groups of gay men. That criticism aside it does provide some interesting information. Nardi's (1999) respondents had very few lesbian friends. Those who did were younger. He tentatively suggests this may be something which younger gays and lesbians are now more liable to do.

Nardi & Sherrod's (1994) results showed that there were similarities with same sex heterosexual relationships, but that gay men's same-sex relationships were more expressive. They conclude tentatively that there may be some mediation of gender by sexual orientation on friendship patterns. The most obvious difference was that the number of respondents who had had sexual relations with their friends or were sexually attracted to them was greater than that reported by heterosexuals. Lesbians in their study



reported that the majority of their friends were past lovers. Further study on this theme by Vetere (1982) comes to the conclusion that: 'Friendship appears to be a prime developmental and maintenance factor in the respondents' lesbian love relationships' (Vetere, 1982; 61).

Rubin (1985) argues that because there is more cultural sanction of female-to-female friendships than that of male-to-male friendships, thus the separation of the erotic from the emotional is more easily made in men.

Another way of exploring friendship patterns is to look at gay men's and lesbians' friendships with heterosexuals. This is important in respect to young people, as the majority of potential friends that are available to them are heterosexual, whilst they are at school. The majority of the research was done from a heterosexual viewpoint (Kolodner, 1992 and Palladino & Stephenson, 1990). Kolodner's (1992) research, which had a small sample and used intimacy scales, was nevertheless interesting. She found significant differences between heterosexual female friendships and heterosexual to lesbian friendships. There was more romantic love and intimacy between same sexuality female friendships, than different sexuality friendships. Reasons for this may be that both heterosexual women and lesbians restrict their conversations about sex and are wary of intimacy. There may also be powerful heterosexist influences at work.

The above research into friendships is rather limited in that the sample sizes are usually small, the respondents are white, North American and part of an established lesbian and

gay network. Whether all of the issues discussed in this research impact on the lives of young gays and lesbians is a moot point.

### **5.3 Friendship Research**

Most of the research into young people's friendships does not specifically focus on young gays and lesbians, nevertheless the findings may be applicable and useful. Sociological research tends to concentrate on structural aspects of friendship with the focus on issues such as gender and power, (Hey 1997, Holland *et al*, 1998). They examine the effects of social structures on the young person's friendship patterns and subsequent behaviour. Psychologists have usually paid attention to the developmental issues whereby friendships are viewed as a resource in the development of the young person's identity, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rubin *et al*, 1998). Several writers have suggested broadening the theoretical base of young people's friendship research in an attempt to explore the multi layers of young people's friendships by using the focal model (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999) and life course theory (Crosnoe, 2000). This section will explore some of this research.

One of the most utilised environments for exploring young people's friendships is the school setting. Ethnographic research in the school setting by Mac an Ghaill (1994), Holland *et al* (1998), and Hey (1997) employed a variety of qualitative methods and provides some useful insights into friendships. Mac an Ghaill's (1994) account is unusual in that it focuses on young men and the position of young women and young gay men in relation to the dominant heterosexual male hegemony. The other approach is to examine

the relationship between young men and women from a particular discourse: an example of this is Holland *et al* (1998).

Hey (1997) conducted her research in two schools, middle class and working class, and focused on young women's friendship. She conducted the research using participant observation and followed a specific registration class. The data was supplemented by interviews with teachers and the young women. Despite the numerous methodological problems of conducting ethnographic research arising from access and the influence the researcher may have on the behaviour they are viewing, Hey (1997) provides a useful account of girls' friendships and states that:

The interpersonal recess of schooling provides the material base where girls are both compelled and determined to make sense of each other and the forms of identity proffered/preferred by: home, school, community, popular and elite male authority. It is between and amongst girls as friends that identities are variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated (Hey, 1997; 30).

It is clear from the above that this, when applied to young lesbians, will have a particular significance. The question arises how is this played out? No answers are forthcoming in her analysis. There are several crucial points raised in this book, which have relevance to my research group and will be further discussed. The first was a notion of what the ideal type of young woman was and this was translated into being good, or to be more accurate, to be seen to be good, as there was evidence of clandestine resistance. In Hey's

(1997) example note passing was employed as a strategy. What is clear from her accounts is that there were several groups, who both through notions of good, race, class or academic excellence, exact power and control on others whether to exclude or include them within the gang. As Hey (1997) further concludes:

Girls' practices, in other words had as their major aim the making of feminine identity or reputation through the axis of conformity to classed sexual codes (Hey, 1997; 130).

Holland's *et al* (1998) research further extends this idea:

Young women can become conscious of their image as a construction when they make a distinction between the presentation of themselves that men respond to, and their 'real self' (Holland et al 1998; 112).

This is similar to the strategy employed by young gays and lesbians of self-monitoring (Synder, 1974) and situated identities (Gecas & Burke, 1995) as ways in which an individual may operate and resist the dominant discourses. One of the conclusions is that the young women within the study partially enforce the masculine cultural hegemony. This raises the question of how young lesbians belong yet maintain difference. Within the results of my study some of these questions are answered.

Holland *et al*, (1998) research was conducted in Manchester and London with a sample of 148 women and 46 men using interviews and questionnaires. Their research takes a feminist viewpoint and explores how power, masculinity and femininity are practised through gendered relationships of young heterosexual men and women. One of the areas the researchers explore is how young people learn about sex. Although this research is about heterosexual sex there are observations which may be pertinent to young gays and lesbians. The research explored both the formal and informal culture of knowledge about sex amongst the young people. Sex education when discussed at home centred on the relationship between mothers and daughters with the dominant discourse being the protection of their daughter from male sexual advances. The majority of young people learned about sex from their peers. However, this is not always viewed as reliable information by the young people. This led me to reflect on how young gays and lesbians do learn about sexual matters from their peers. Previous research (Warwick *et al* (2000) has only explored formal sex education for young gays and lesbians. Holland *et al*. (1998) research indicates that the discourse of sex education amongst young people does not only provide information. These discourses on sex education amongst young people have a powerful effect on the young people's ideas about masculine and feminine identities and subsequent emotional and sexual relationships. Young gays and lesbians may also be influenced by these discourses.

The majority of young people in the study however learned about sex from each other.

Embodied sexual experience is perhaps the most important way in which young people learn about sex (Holland *et al* 1998; 79).

These experiences of sex may for young women differ from the romantic discourses of sex and ultimately lead to dissatisfaction with the sexual act. Both young men and women through the embodiment of sexual relations also learn the process of negotiation. This type of learning may be absent for young gays and lesbians. One of the main thrusts of the research is the empowerment of both young men and women from the shackles of the hegemony of heterosexual masculinity in defining sexual relationships. For both young men and women the peer group plays a role in applying pressure to perform appropriate sexual activity. This pressure is seen to be more acute on young men. Young gays and lesbians also occupy this social space and their responses to this type of pressure may prove interesting. It is of note that Holland *et al* (1998) conclude by discussing the problem of how to situate lesbians within the discourse. What is of interest is how lesbians manage this discourse. The oft-repeated war of the sexes, the male predator and female resistor, is played out in the social world of young people and within this: 'Etiquette in the practices of adolescent seduction that is understood by men and women' (Holland *et al*, 1998; 91).

It is within the structure of heterosexuality that this discourse takes place. Mac an Ghaill (1994) discusses the place of gay youth within this discourse. The respondents in his study felt that gays had been removed from school view and were not part of the school. One of his respondents, Sean, gives an account of how he felt the teachers and the school,

through his sporting prowess, which was held up as an example to maintain the dominant discourse of male heterosexuality, were using his body. All of this occurred whilst they were unaware he was gay (Mac an Ghaill 1994). He surmises they would have been confused if they had known. What is clear from his accounts is how young gay men are acutely aware of the social conventions and boundaries that they are required to navigate around.

This is further borne out by Wight (1996) where he identifies four types of discourse that categorise young men's relationships with women: '*uninterested discourse*', '*predatory discourse*', '*permissive discourse*' and '*romantic discourse*'. Within this the only social space for young gay men is the uninterested discourse, but the cartoon used by Wight suggests this discourse was utilised by hard men. This suggests it was part of a wider male gender discourse associated with other 'traditional masculine' behaviours and may in reality not be an option for young gay men. Wight's study was located in Glasgow and based on interviews of 98, 19 year olds from a working-class background.

The social spaces occupied by young gays and lesbians are fraught with problems, not least the association of gender with heterosexuality. They are faced with the problem of trying to establish a gender identity whilst establishing a sexuality, which is viewed as being in opposition to their gender.

Within the school environment teasing and bullying were found by Gordon *et al* (2000) to be strategies used to marginalize some of the pupils. This research, which was a cross-

cultural study, used four schools in Finland, England and Wales. The researchers followed a class throughout the day and used participant observation and interviews. They found that the use of the words 'poof' and 'homo' as derogatory name-calling was utilised by both genders for different reasons. In the study the male respondents called others 'homo' or 'poof' if they were effeminate or had got too close to them. As Gordon *et al* (2000) writes:

This name-calling is an effective form of policing the boundaries of heterosexuality and marginalizes those boys, who are not heterosexual, and they have to live between visibility and the painful safety of invisibility (Gordon *et al*, 2000; 134).

The young women in Gordon's study used name-calling as a form of protection against boys. There were no accounts within their data of name-calling of lesbians. Malinsky's (1997) study explored the experiences of young lesbians whilst at school. She reported feelings of alienation, bullying and mental stress. A retrospective study by Harris & Bliss (1997) of gays' and lesbians' experiences at school, based in North America, concludes with the argument:

That individuals should not have to face the conflict of integrity versus openness...it is the responsibility of members of society to change the culture particularly in schools (Harris & Bliss, 1997; 98).



The previous discussion on young people's friendship had as its emphasis the structural elements which maintain social order and influence young people's behaviour. Identity performance from this perspective is seen as being part of the social order. The focus is on the role positions that the actors take e.g. teacher pupil, male female. Psychology's interest is generally on the developmental aspects of friendship and the conflicts individuals face in relation to different group membership. Crosnoe (2000) argues that life course theory can bridge the gaps between the psychological perspective and sociological perspectives on young people's friendships. Life course theory encompasses a multidisciplinary paradigm, which examines structural contexts, and social change in people's lives. The focus of the theory is on the connection between individual lives and the historical and socioeconomic context in which these lives unfold. There are four principles:

(1) lives are lived independently; (2) individuals construct their life courses within a set of social constraints; (3) the developmental impact of life events depends on their timing in life; and (4) the individual life course is embedded in historical time and place (Elder, 1998; 383).

As a concept, a life course is defined as 'a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time' (Giele and Elder, 1998; 22). The use of this framework to explore young people's friendship, according to Crosnoe (2000), opens up important avenues of research. His premise is that previous research has not explored the role of friendship in young people with problematic development. This approach may

then be pertinent for young gays and lesbians. He further argues that it is the quality and network of friends that are as important as the nature and types of friends a young person has. Crosnoe (2000) advocates that there are fields of study within young people's friendship where life course theory would be useful. The study of interplay between development and social trajectories would allow information to be gathered on the effects of friendships on later relationships, this type of study was undertaken by Möller & Statten (2001) in Sweden. She conducted a longitudinal study and concluded that a son's warm, close relationship with their father was the best predictor of a happy adult relationship. Although this research was on heterosexual relationships it may be applicable to young gays and lesbians. The approach that Crosnoe (2000) advocates, although interesting, is only useful when conducting a longitudinal study which is not possible in this research.

Goossens & Marcoen (1999) undertook a cross-cultural study which tested the focal model to explore adolescent relationships and found that there was some evidence to support the focal model's premise that relationship concerns are linked to individuation. They suggest that what the theory lacks is 'the role of self-perception factors in dealing with focal issues' (Goossens Marcoen, 1999; 76). This thesis aims to uncover the perceptions that the respondents have of relationships but will not relate the data to developmental issues as the focus of the inquiry is on perceptions and stories from a symbolic interactionist and psychoanalysis perspective.

Cross-gender friendship studies show that gender plays an important role in how friendship networks are structured (Thorne, 1993). Faggot's (1994) research

demonstrated that young people were reluctant to admit they had friends of the opposite gender. It may be that young people who have developmental or social problems only have cross gender friendships (Kovacs *et al*, 1996). The nature and types of friendships that the respondents have within this research will be explored in terms of gender.

#### **5.4 Family**

An alternative view is to explore friends as family. How friendship patterns may replace or enhance family has been the subject of several studies (Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1992; Weeks *et al*, 2001). Friendships may provide a safe haven and opportunity to build supportive networks. This may be important in the face of prejudice or external censor. The advent of HIV and AIDS, it could be surmised, provided an impetus for the development of supportive networks. Research by Kurdek & Schmitt (1987) found that the source of emotional support for gay men was from other gay men. Friends may in many cases fulfil the traditional role of the family. This allows new forms of relationships to take place. This joining together can play a powerful role in the formation of identities and cultural norms.

Little (1989) introduces the political nature of friendship: 'Gay friendships can restructure the social forces that seem to constrain the nature of friendship' (Little, 1989; 145).

This politicalisation is seen in the changes in the law to allow legal recognition to same sex partnerships, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of sexuality, may enter into civil

partnerships. This globalisation and public debate of these matters must to some extent have an impact on the types and forms of all people's relationships, not just gay and lesbian family networks.

The relevance to the young gays and lesbians of the above may be that unless they have access to social spaces where other gay and lesbian peers meet, they will be unable to get this support. There also exists the problem that as an adult I am able to maintain a greater degree of control over my social spaces. Young gays and lesbians who access gay and lesbian spaces may have to hide this from their peers at school. This and other issues will be discussed within the data.

Savin-Williams (1997) reviewed the research on gay and lesbian youth's relationships with their parents from a psychological perspective. The issues of coming out to one's parent is usually seen as the focus of most of the writings but Savin-Williams explores relationships with parents further. His conclusions are that gays and lesbians have better relationships with their mother than their father. This is the same as that of heterosexual youth. The long-term effects of disclosure and the perspective of the parents have not been researched (Savin-Williams, 1997).

The other area lacking in research is why young people choose not to disclose to their parents. However, as other research has found (Pilkington & Augelli, 1995), that may be because young gays and lesbians experience abuse from family members when they come out. In their research mothers were the more usual instigators of abuse and lesbians

more liable to be physically assaulted, which may contradict Savin-Williams' (1997) research that mothers had the best relationships with their children. There is of course the reason that the young gay or lesbian may not wish to disappoint or hurt their parent. Herdt & Boxer (1993) highlight some of the strategies young people may use to avoid telling their parents. The young person may be economical with the areas that they discuss with their parents. Another ploy is to tell a sibling in the hope that they are supportive. Telling parents regardless of the ploy is a concern to a large number of young gays and lesbians. Hettrick & Martin (1987) reported that 60% of the young people presenting at the clinic had problems with their family.

Whether the telling to parents has a negative or positive effect on mental health is not a straightforward question. The research so far has given contradictory results. Rotheram-Borus, Hunter & Rosario (1994) amongst others related suicide to parents knowing. On the other hand Savin-Williams (1990) showed that there was no difference in self-esteem of those who had told or not told their parents. I suspect it is a rather more complex relationship with other factors and longitudinal studies may be called for. The decision whether to tell parents is not one that is exclusively a problem of the young, but is one that goes into middle age and there may be longer-term effects of non-disclosure. Regardless, for young people parents are not generally the first person they consider telling (Savin-Williams, 1997); the person that is usually told is a friend.

The majority of the research in this area that I reviewed was conducted in North America and was based on questionnaires and psychological scales. The findings may not be completely transferable to the UK social scene.

### **5.5 Sexuality and Youth**

The purpose of this section is an attempt to explore the development of sexuality as part of the wider concept of identity within young people (Cain, 1991; Baumrind, 1995). The wider issues of the construction of sexuality and homosexuality have been discussed earlier. Sexuality and young people is often perceived as problematic, focusing on teenage pregnancies, HIV and AIDS, sexual diseases and contraception. Some authors, (Holland, 1998 and Wight, 1996), write about heterosexual relationships amongst youth from a more sociological perspective, trying to unravel what actually occurs. Within Wight's (1996) work on male heterosexual relationships several discourses about sex are discussed. These are: predatory related to gender image, permissive related to enjoyment, and the have and hold discourse, which is a romantic discourse. The extent to which these discourses are mirrored in young gay and lesbian discourses on sexual encounters is as yet unknown. As Griffin (1993) writes: 'Indeed the mainstream literature on "adolescent (hetero) sexuality" has been relatively separate from that on lesbian and young gay people' (Griffin, 1993; 144).

My interest in this section is therefore on the wider development of sexuality amongst young people, with reference to gays and lesbians, the process by which sexuality is embodied and socially enacted.

Simon (1996) takes a post-modernist approach to the study of sexuality and adolescents.

He urges that:

We place all sexual behaviour in the larger context of the lives lived by those having the experiences (Simon, 1996; 39).

He further argues that little attention has been paid to the intra-psychic level of sexual development amongst adolescents by which he does not mean the traditional psychoanalytical view, but approaches it from the perspective of how the sexual is put to social and psychic use. His approach is one that emphasises sexual scripts and the socially produced development of the erotic sense of self in adolescence. This concern for the possibility of sexual life within the adolescent is raised by peers, adults and internal desires, not that: 'The desire for sex is in the exclusive control of sexual desire' (Simon, 1996; 72).

Furthermore Simon (1996) argues that once a person is defined as adolescent by society they are: 'Assumed to become a self motivated sexual actor' (Simon, 1996; 73).

This differs radically from the psychoanalytical and developmental approaches in several key areas. He also argues that the family is also in transition and that the society we live in has more discourse about sexuality. This liberalisation has had the following effect:

Gone or radically diminished are the years of sexual or near sexual fantasy and anticipation. ... this was a period where sexual scripts could be elaborated in ways that reflected the issues of social life without the effective surveillance of social life. (Simon, 1996; 64).

This application of post-modernity to adolescence raises some interesting questions in that the pressure to master one's sexual scripts in contemporary society becomes a more crucial act for adolescents. In addition, the dynamic state of society would suggest that the sexual scripts of new generations would be different from past generations. The previous discussion on the developmental approaches to adolescence noted that heterosexual union was conveyed as the norm, thus creating the need to have theories of deviance to explain why in the face of societal pressure individuals do not attain the norm. The Freudian answer was that the object of desire was not an extension of the desire, but was overlayed on the desire. This transference of desire leads to the realisation that two individuals may have the same behaviour, but the roots are in different desires.

In essence there would therefore be no universal label to explain the behaviours. To take this further, neither the reliance on gender for heterosexuality or for homosexuality can fully explain what is going on inside a person's head at the intra-psychic level. There then exists a tension between the demands at the intra-psychic level, the cultural level and interpersonal level and for the adolescent or young person these at times are age specific. That is, in terms of what is expected of people at particular ages, this is not fixed, nor is it always discernible to the young person.



The work of Bem (1996) takes a different route to try and explain the erotic choice of gender partner. The theoretical roots are firmly in the developmental school of thought. In brief the argument is that girls who engage in boy type behaviours (non-gender specific girls) may feel different and this becomes exotic and at physiological arousal becomes erotic. It is this feeling of difference whether it is with boys observing girls or non-gender specific girls observing girls that are transferred to eroticism. The evidence used to support this theory comes from the self-reported feelings of difference gay and lesbian adults had whilst young, which were cited as gender behaviour differences (San Francisco Bay Study by Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith, 1981). The difficulty with this is two fold. Firstly the study is retrospective and thus individuals can re-script their differences by rooting it in the past. Secondly, maybe they were different: it doesn't in itself explain difference. The theory also purports to explain why women's sexuality is more fluid than men in that women are less bound by gender rules- a conclusion that does not bear out as ethnographic research on young girls by Hey (1997) showed that girls were subject to gender rules. In similarity to the biological research on the development of homosexuality (Hershberger, 2001) there is a lack of conclusive data as well as a lack of data on women, with the exception of Kitzinger (1987).

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The studies discussed in this chapter are not only from different disciplines but also utilise different methodologies. To draw conclusions is problematic, as the majority of studies are not directly focused on young gays and lesbians. However, young gays and

lesbians are subject to the same social influences in forming friendships. It may be that there are other factors which are yet to be uncovered. What is clear is that dating patterns, relationships within the family and friendships are as yet areas of research amongst young gays and lesbians that are poorly developed. It is perhaps time to employ the method of collecting stories from the young rather than subject them to a battery of psychological tests. After all it is this method that has produced the in depth analysis from adult gay and lesbian friendships. It is also evident that social psychology researchers advocate a multi-theoretical approach to the study of adolescence (Crosnoe, 2000; Goossens & Marcoen, 1999).

## **Chapter 6**

### **Researching Young Gays and Lesbians**

‘I am waiting for them to stop talking about the other, to stop even describing how important it is to be able to talk about difference. It is not just important what we speak about but how and why we speak’ (hooks, 1990; 151-2).

#### **6.1 Introduction**

Writing about homosexuality and young people, as previously discussed, has arisen from a multitude of disciplines and theoretical understandings. The task now is to draw these seemingly contradictory positions into a coherent conceptualisation that may add to the research on young gays and lesbians.

This chapter aims to set out the methods and strategy involved in conducting my research. Whilst reading and writing about young gays and lesbians several issues arose and these are further discussed in this chapter. How to approach the subject and represent the subject were two key areas. The status of the researcher and the relationship of the researcher with the participants also require discussion. This chapter seeks to clarify my position on these issues and describe how the research was conducted and the data analysed.

The research is qualitative in approach. It rejects dichotomies and fixed categorisation and examines agency as processual and relational. It intends to explore the lives of the respondents and their social and sexual relationships. The approach actively involved the

participants in the generation of the analysis and interpretation. This pragmatic approach acknowledges that there is no final truth.

Denzin (1989) outlines several steps to the interpretation of data and the setting up of research. The first step is to locate the research topic within one's own personal history, a process that involves personal reflection.

The second is the deconstruction of what has occurred previously. This is discussed in the literature review and includes how the phenomena have been defined, analysed and observed whilst giving a critical analysis of previous definitions. It allows the evaluation of previous underlying models of human action in prior studies to be made explicit and enables the researcher to present previous preconceptions and bias.

Using Denzin's (1989) approach the chapter will firstly explore the location of the research topic within my own history. This approach is congruent with a psychoanalytical perspective in uncovering the influence of self on the research.

## **6.2 Locating the Research Topic: Insider Status and Rhetoric**

My understanding of the literature and data was being placed in relationship to self as a lesbian. As Simon writes:

All attempts at theorizing social life are, at the same time, works of autobiography  
(Simon, 1996; 1).

This has several implications, some of which Platzer (1997)<sup>6</sup> explored. Insider status may lead to a better rapport with the participants, however caution requires to be exercised in terms of assumptions that may be held by both parties and not fully explored. Platzer (1997) warns against being desensitised, as part of what is explained is also part of one's own lived experience.

There are theoretical considerations arising from insider status. Kitzinger (1987) discusses the differences between insider rhetoric and distancing; both are claiming veracity based on their appeal of presenting reality. The issue as she states:

Is not whether to use rhetoric in scientific writing, but how to use it and in whose interests, and how to recognise it and analyse its use (Kitzinger, 1987; 31).

This approach views knowledge as a way of coping or achieving an aim and as the knowledge claims are not general, there is no grand theory. Analysis becomes one of constant, reflective practice and one cannot mark out in advance what is inside or outside of the area. Knowledge is always contestable and although it makes claims to veracity, it produces versions that may be beneficial or detrimental to structures or subjects and in that way is political.

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<sup>6</sup> She discusses the methodology and ethics of researching stigmatised groups

However, these sources are imbued with different meanings and differing relationships, which require unravelling, Weston unravels families whilst constantly providing her reflective lens. She states: 'My task could not be described as an exploration of strangeness inside the familiar but rather discovering the stuff of everyday life' (Weston, 1991; 10).

However, the problems of insider status are not only about uncovering taken for granted understandings. For all researchers the process of conducting interviews and reflecting on the information obtained by its nature changes the subsequent information. The researcher is involved in a process of building pictures and trying to make sense of what is uncovered. The researcher does not start that process as a blank sheet, but as a person with views, experiences and an awareness of some of the issues involved in the research. The competing paradigms within sexuality research have, as previously discussed, political implications regarding the representation of the participants. The laudable aim of wishing to represent the respondents and to some degree self comes crashing down when faced with the dilemma of how to write up the first interview and what effect that would have on subsequent interviews. After many debates I concluded that to leave out an account of the very first interview would be unethical. I would be guilty of at least the sin of omission and at most a failure to acknowledge a very real problem that faces researchers who are in some senses in the same category as the researched.

The first informant at the start of the interview disclosed:

*'I was lighting fires, doing stupid things, getting in trouble with the police'* (Alan)

This was in response to a very general question about what he did at primary school. One could surmise that the response raised alarm bells in my head due to my psychiatric background and knowledge of the strong association between some forms of psychological distress, in particular self-mutilation amongst women and fire setting amongst men, and homosexuality.

The effect of that one sentence sent me back to ask myself what was the point of this research, if all that I found reinforced prejudice. Did I subsequently ask all respondents about psychological distress and in doing so frame their possible responses? Alternatively did I ask no direct questions on distress and only ask questions if the respondents volunteered the information? I decided not to prejudge and to allow the respondents to initiate any information on distress. I surmised that as my aim was to examine life experience and as that usually involves some distress the respondents would initiate the topic if it was important for them. I took the view that the respondent was the best judge of what caused distress. In subsequent interviews several of the respondents recounted how they dealt with the conflicting pressures on their lives, which are explored later in subsequent chapters. It is worth reiterating at this juncture that it is the societal stresses that the young people found themselves in that resulted in the psychological traumas.

For me, the eliciting of accounts of youth is part of everyday life and part of my past. I wished to elicit a narrative through a set period of time. Therefore, the connections are more interwoven with self. I was dissatisfied with the accounts of homosexuality that viewed homosexuality as a developmental path with stages of *coming out*. The notion of an event, particularly *coming out*, seemed to me to miss the dynamic and fluid crossing of boundaries that gay people undertake. I viewed the process as one of *coming in*, that is a process which involves the negotiation of relationships with self and with different social worlds. This also reinforces the notion of dynamic identities. It became apparent that my work was being informed by interpretative interactionism. I had started from the location of the problematic situation within self and I had begun to state my value, position two conditions necessary for this approach. As discussed by Denzin (1989), interpretive interactionism is: 'Existential, biographical, interactional, naturalistic, postpositive' (Denzin, 1989; 19).

### **6.3 Development of a Theoretical Position**

The range and diversity of positions espoused within the literature review proved a difficult task to negotiate around. My own ontological position had led me to attempt to marry two different epistemological positions, that of symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis. I will argue that each of these positions offers very necessary but different insights into people's lives and attempt to discuss how this can be operationalised within the research.



As Golding (1982) writes:

The relationship between individual and society is complex, tense and contradictory and psychoanalysis can show us why (Golding, 1982; 547).

One area which may be fruitful is to examine how individuals develop a sense of self. Symbolic interactionism views this development as an internalisation of the appraisals of others and the subsequent self reflected appraisal. This conceptualisation may be useful when examining the respondents' experiences of prejudice. The extent to which the respondents internalise homophobia and their subsequent behaviour can be viewed from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Psychoanalysis can add to this picture by uncovering the process of the self appraisal. The self within psychoanalysis occupies two worlds, the outer social world and an inner psychic world. This inner psychic world houses our fantasies and unconscious struggles. The individual's past experiences impact on their self appraisal. Uncovering these processes will add to the picture and move towards an understanding of how individuals relate to society.

The foci of psychoanalysis are emotions, the understanding of the unconscious life and its effect on daily life. Symbolic interaction on the other hand explores the social, individual action and the meanings ascribed to the action. The difference between the two approaches is summed up by Swanson (1961):

Like Mead, Freud wanted to account for rationality. Whereas Mead was concerned with the irrationality which appears because the environment does not

respond properly to the individual's inner life, Freud sought to understand the irrationality produced by subjective conditions which prevent the individual from properly interpreting the world around them (Swanson, 1961; 323).

Symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis have as their focus very different concerns. The structure of society that allows individual actions and the individual's internal condition are two very necessary areas to explore. Understanding why individuals may act or not act in similar situations adds another layer to social analysis.

Symbolic interactionism views individuals as being constituted through social relations. Individuals are said to understand self through affirming society. Although psychoanalysis accepts the influence of culture upon the individual, there is a fundamental difference. Psychoanalysis views culture as the struggle of our unconscious which strives against our mortality and repression. Thus individuals inhabit their inner world of desire and repression and the outer social world simultaneously. Psychoanalysis adds depth to the sociological view of the world rather than being at odds with it.

There are some similarities between the two positions which make using both approaches useful: both analyses view actions as being the result of numerous influences within a situation rather than as a simple stimulus response. As discussed previously in the literature review I was influenced by Plummer's (1995) work on sexual stories and accordingly have included in chapter 8 Mark's story as the basis of the organisation of

this chapter. Chapter 8 is analysed from a symbolic interactionist perspective based on Plummer's (1995) work on stories. In chapter 9 I explore the sexual scripts of the respondents by drawing on the work of Wight (1996) and Simon (1996). Thus each data chapter is viewed from a different perspective. However, the overall framework of the research is Plummer's (1995) perspective advocating the sociology of stories. My contribution to this conceptualisation is to add psychoanalysis as a voice within the sociology of stories.

#### **6.4 The Issue of Researching Differences**

This section explores two issues, arising out of the literature in qualitative research, which are relevant to this work. The first issue is how to represent the other. Previous discussion, in this thesis, on the nature of the self was from a psychological and sociological perspective. It is also necessary to examine the moral and ethical framework that the researcher utilises to approach the other self. Benhabib<sup>7</sup> (1992) puts forward two ideas of the other, 'the generalized other' and the 'concrete other'. The generalized other is more like Rogers view of the other, in that we view the other as we view self. It is not difference that marks us out but similarity. We follow the old adage of do unto others as one would want done to self. Individuals govern their relations with one another through a system of rights and duties. The concrete other is from an entirely different perspective. According to Benhabib: 'We abstract from what constitutes our commonality and focus on individuality' (Benhabib, 1992; 152).

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion on these issues see Benhabib's (1992) discussion on the Kohlberg-Gilligan controversy.

As opposed to 'the generalized other' where the relationship was organised by formal equality and reciprocity, the 'concrete other' relationship is organised by equity and complementary reciprocity. According to Benhabib if the position of the concrete other is taken then differences become irrelevant. She explores the argument further by examining gender and the position of women. What she is arguing in part is that if we can only see self from the shoes of the other, then we are not masters of our fate, we become casualties. Her philosophical stance on identity is:

Identity does not refer to my potential for choice alone, but to the actuality of my choices, namely how I, as a finite, concrete, embodied individual, shape and fashion the circumstances of my birth and family, linguistic, cultural and gender identity into a coherent narrative that stands as my life story (Benhabib, 1992; 162).

This is related to the second issue of how to write about and represent difference. Fine (1998) suggests that the researcher works the hyphen between self and other by exploring one's part in othering. In order to check out what is happening within the research relationship Fine (1998) advocates that the researcher constantly requests feedback from the respondents. During the interviews, in order to facilitate feedback, I summarised each interview. At the start of the second interview I fed back the summary of the previous interview. Although a researcher may constantly seek clarification to ascertain what is occurring the researcher is then faced with how to write up what has occurred.

The problem becomes one of how to explore and represent differences in a way that empowers and allows differences and diversity. As Seidman argues:

Differences not only structure social life but because social knowledge, including the knowledge produced by experts, is itself part of society, they are structured by social differences (Seidman, 1997; 14).

This requires that the cultural and social power structures need to be addressed when viewing the data. The very act of conducting research on the lived experiences of young gays and lesbians may result in the creation of other, which arises from conceptualising sexuality as either homosexual or heterosexual, as this would be using a binary construct to examine individuals. Simon & Gagnon (1967) argue that:

It is necessary to move away from an obsessive concern with the sexuality of the individual and attempt to see the homosexual in terms of the broader attachments he must make to live in the world around him (Simon & Gagnon, 1967; 10).

Instead of focusing on what is a homosexual, lesbian or gay person I will focus on the relationships that gays and lesbians make in their everyday lives whilst examining the social pressure they encounter.

## **6.5 Sample and Recruitment**

I had a sample group of ten young gay men and ten young lesbian women, aged 16 - 21 for individual interviews. Due to the drop-out rate I was left with a final sample of seven young gay men and seven young gay women. There were a variety of reasons for the drop out rate, which are discussed within the section on interviews. I discarded the initial interviews with the six drop outs, as my intention was to gain a more biographical sense of the respondents over time. As I interviewed some respondents three times I was left with 31 discrete interviews.

One of the reasons for choosing both men and women was to explore the place of sexuality within the discourse of gender difference. The majority of previous studies as discussed in the literature review were single sex and retrospective.

The participants were drawn from the gay and lesbian youth project Stonewall, from BLOGS (the University of Edinburgh group) and from the Lothian Gay and Lesbian Switchboard. I approached each of these groups and in an open meeting discussed the nature of the research and asked for volunteers. I considered it to be appropriate that the respondents could meet me and ask questions before volunteering.

It is not realistic in terms of gay and lesbian research to produce a representative sample (Platzer, 1997) but it is possible to produce a diverse sample from various starting points.

It was not possible to recruit a sample with representatives from ethnic minorities. I was able to recruit a diverse sample in terms of social class and educational background.

I only wanted the experiences of individuals who were raised in Scotland. This was not meant to be parochial, but allowed some similarity of culture representations and language and mirrored Seidman's (1997) research for local purposes. I was also aware that previous research by Plummer (1975) was based in England and Wales

One of the usual methods of gaining a sample in gay and lesbian research is to "snowball" (Brendstrup & Schmit 1990) that is to ask the initial participants to encourage others to participate in the research. This method was employed which meant that not all those interviewed belonged to any of the organised groups of BLOGS<sup>8</sup>, Stonewall<sup>9</sup> or Switchboard.

When anyone turns to the academic writings of gay and lesbian sexuality it becomes apparent that research problems of definition become synonymous with ideological stance.

In studies of the homosexual population if informants are selected from the gay community, then inclusion is dependent on the sample's degree of activity in the gay community (Harry, 1986). Empirical evidence may, therefore, be based on limited

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<sup>8</sup> The University of Edinburgh's bisexual, lesbian or gay society

samples (Davies, 1986). This is necessary in order to define the boundaries of the study. Only a partial segment of gay experience may be captured as some gay people remain hidden. All of this, however, rests on the premise that a definition of homosexual population is an agreed subject categorisation. This is far from the case as discussed by Donovan (1992) and Davies (1986). These arguments are discussed in numerous research articles about gays and lesbians (Davies *et al*, 1983). For the purposes of this research only, individuals who define themselves as lesbian, gay or queer were included. It was not the intention of this research to discover the 'true' homosexual but to generate accounts. I take Kitzinger's (1987) view that those who self-identify as gay, lesbian or queer shall be included.

One of the dominant cultural constructs within gay and lesbian writings is the notion of community. The concept of community and in particular the notion of gay community requires discussion. The gay community is a source of public narrative the individual negotiates with. The gay community is therefore a social space in which the respondents are required to negotiate their identity. The concept of 'gay community' suggests homogeneity among the population which may not be. It minimises the differences amongst groups of 'homosexuals' whose only communality is their sexuality.

Community can also be used as a term to bring together individuals who share a common interest, either political or social (Bornat, 1993). These perceptions of the gay and lesbian

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<sup>9</sup> Stonewall, a gay and lesbian youth organisation for those under 20.



community for some participants can pose as a barrier which restricts their access to the gay and lesbian community and to its services (Robertson & Hutcheson, 1995)

The most widely held personal meaning of the concept of community which frames individuals' experiences found by Robertson & Hutcheson (1995) is that of the gay community constraining the forces of an opposing community, the heterosexual world.

The concept of community is therefore a variable rather than a fixed entity, which both the researcher and participants will have incorporated into their schemata of self and their relationships.

## **6.6 Strategies of Inquiry**

One of the tasks facing any researcher is to decide which method of inquiry best suits the subject area. Previous research into young people's lives has taken a plethora of approaches. Several writers, Holland, *et al* (1998) and Wight (1996) have used interviews, whilst Savin-Williams (1997) used questionnaires and psychological tests. The other method, most often employed, was an ethnographic approach where the researcher situated themselves usually within a school. It was difficult, whilst reading the accounts of young people, which used mainly ethnographic methods (Gordon, *et al*, 2000; Hey, 1997) to envisage how this approach could be utilised in this research. I concluded that it was impractical and that therefore the participants would be the primary source of information. There were several methods available and the writing of diaries

did have some attraction. This would have allowed a more textual analysis and given a greater temporal feel to the research. There were, however problems associated with this. Questions such as where would the participants hide the diaries, could one place an extra demand on the participants especially during examination times, would this approach be a disincentive to less literary participants were considered. On balance this approach was rejected because of these problems. The other method considered was focus groups: however this would not have given me a temporal and personal account of individuals' lives. I would have a different type of data, which may have focused on other concerns. Thus, I decided that the two best-suited strategies of inquiry were individual interview and reflective writing.

## **6.7 Interview**

Interviews are not without problems and this section discusses some of the issues that arose within the interviews in this study.

As Silverman (1993) discusses, the interviewer and interviewee construct a version of the interview based on their perception of the relationship and their positions within the relationship. In line with theory, the approach I have used is an interpretative interactionist approach, as used by Denzin, (1989), in which the interview is seen as an opportunity to engage in mutual observation. This allows the participants to create and set the agenda in conjunction with the interviewer. Participants are invited to define the terms and this is crucial when exploring words like family, community and sexuality. It

also created the opportunity for issues to be raised, which I may not have been aware of. This is of particular importance when dealing with an age difference. It also allows the development of each interaction to be viewed in terms of how each individual framed and sequenced what was said. However, despite this style of open-ended interviewing that I adopted the questions asked within the interview are still framed by the researcher. In order to address the problem that I may inadvertently miss a crucial line of inquiry within the interview I asked all respondents if there were any topics they wished to discuss that had not been raised.

Denzin (1989) proposes that the researcher shares the interview, in that the interviewer creates a joint understanding of what has occurred with the interviewee. This involves constant seeking of clarification and summarising as the interview progresses. In any encounter between two people, both arrive with prior knowledge, assumptions and history and the meeting is framed by the context and aim of the meeting. That becomes the starting point of the investigation.

There are issues around whether this approach makes the participants more conscious of the structural and personal issues they are encountering. This would seem unlikely as previous research by Kus (1985) shows that gay and lesbians are acutely aware of the issues, while Abbot & Love (1977) refer to this as the 'sane schizophrenia' inherent in passing as straight.

I conducted an initial pilot interview. This was not used in the final analysis. The pilot provided useful topics that were explored in the subsequent interviews. I conducted at least two interviews with each of the respondents, where possible. This allowed for reflection on behalf of the participants and researcher and provided a biographical sense of who they were over time.

An additional advantage of conducting two interviews was that the participants may be less likely to give the researcher what they think she wants to hear as there is the opportunity for them to revise their stories. This allowed for comparison between stories and the development of the story. I was able to feed back issues to the respondents.

Inevitably some of the respondents failed to attend the second interview, young people are going through major life changes within the space of a year and some had left the area. The time between interviews was on average five months. I considered that a year would be too long within the lives of young people and that the chances of follow up would be diminished. I chose the time span of three to five months as being not too long an interval that the initial interview would be forgotten but long enough for significant life changes to have occurred. There were of course difficulties in arranging interviews in that most of the respondents were at school and for example the months of May and June are when examinations are. All of these factors meant that the time interval between interviews varied according to personal circumstances.

One of the male respondents and two of the female respondents had three interviews. All of the third interviews were undertaken one week after the second interview. I decided to include in the analysis of the data those respondents who had done two or more interviews. I had initially intended to do only two interviews but some of the respondents' initial interviews did not take them to the present day and required a second shortly after. The first interviews focused on life to the present and the second on life in the interim plus feeding back on earlier statements.

Despite choosing between three and five months for the time interval for the second interview, I was unable to make contact with six of the respondents. This transpired during the transition from school to work or higher education. When I interviewed the respondents in April five months later some of the older respondents had left school. On reflection, although I lost contact with some of the respondents, the period from April, May and June to August, September and October did produce data that was richer in terms of life events than interviews held during other time frames. The data produced during the time frame prior to and after Christmas did produce more vivid accounts of family relationships.<sup>10</sup> The time frame between interviews had to be variable because some of the respondents were unable to attend until after their examinations were finished.

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<sup>10</sup> This is certainly a factor that I will take into account in any future research that attempts to chart change in young peoples lives.

The place in which an interview takes place can influence the dynamics of the interview and may affect the power relationship. There are also practical issues to take into account when planning a venue. Some of the young adults who attended Stonewall lived outwith Edinburgh and were at school during the day. Consequently, some interviews took place at Stonewall during the time that the group met. Subsequent interviews were then arranged with the participants through e-mail and they then chose the venue. Interviews with other participants took place in my office; this was mainly with those who were already attending the university.

The interviews initially had the danger of turning into coming out-stories. Coming out stories are a phenomenon of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and since about 1970 have entered the public domain. Sexual story telling within the gay and lesbian community is often used as a basis for community building. It can be seen as a basis of *camaraderie* (Zera, 1992). It is argued that stories allow individuals to create a sense of self: identity becomes a life story (Plummer, 1995). My primary concern was in the nature of relationships and the perceptions of the respondents of their social lives. By focusing on the relationships the respondents made I was trying to ascertain what factors influenced their behaviour and changes in behaviour. In this way I framed the interview away from coming out or in towards a more complex story of how they became comfortable with self.

The interviews were taped and then transcribed. At the beginning and end of each interview, I wrote up field notes.



In the first interview I started by asking the respondents general opening questions about where they grew up. The topics discussed were awareness of their sexuality and what being gay or lesbian meant, as discussed in Chapter 7. The second and third interview focused on what had happened since the last meeting and specific topics about family, friends, school or relationships, which arose from the previous interview. The second interview also asked the respondents questions about how they envisaged the future.

The style of interviewing reflected my desire to uncover the internal worlds of the respondents. This was achieved by asking questions such as: 'What was going on in your head at that time?' rather than asking the question 'Why did you do that?' What transpired was that for long periods within the interviews I was silent as the respondents gave accounts of what they had been thinking and doing. It is interesting in that responses to questions which ask a respondent to reflect are longer and more coherent than responses which arose from requests to explain what happened. Whilst listening to the tapes it was apparent that transcripts do not accurately reflect the different qualities of silence. The emotional energy that was involved for the respondents at times was considerable and almost without exception the respondents commented on how exhausting the interview was, but that they hadn't previously related these stories. My tentative conclusion is that I had tapped into their internal private stories that they told self, which was different from the usual public discourses they had with their peers. I discounted the idea that the respondents had not previously thought of these issues as the responses were cogent and without pause.

This conclusion is reinforced by what occurred at the end of the interviews. The one area, which I had not thought about, was that as an older lesbian, the younger gay men and lesbians viewed me as a source of knowledge on gay and lesbian lifestyles. What transpired at the end of the interviews were numerous questions from the respondents about relationships and life. I had thought about insider status and age difference but had not read anywhere about the respondents asking questions. On reflection and hindsight, this may have been naïve because, as I was to discover, for some of the respondents I was one of the few older people who knew about their sexuality as well as also being a lesbian. Interesting as some of these accounts were, I took the view that they should not be included in the data as it was off-tape and primarily because to use this would, in my opinion, be without the respondents' direct consent as they were not taped interactions. What I did do in subsequent interviews was ask the general question of whether there was anything from the previous meeting they wished to discuss. This was in the hope that they might raise some of the topics without feeling pressurised. Some did, and those that did not I didn't pursue. Some of the issues which arose as a result of this off-tape discussion, are considered further in the relevant findings chapters.

## **6.8 Practicalities: Ethical Issues**

There were several ethical issues that concerned the research, which I had envisaged before starting the research.



### **Confidentiality**

The research was fully explained to the participants and shaped by the participants, thus ensuring informed consent. All material was confidential. All material was coded to ensure anonymity and to ensure that participants were not identifiable through the research.

### **Legal issues**

Any discussion regarding sexual behaviour with younger participants will not be promotional. The difficulties encountered are less than those of researchers investigating illegal activities such as drug use.

### **Suicide**

The suicide rates, as previously discussed in the literature review, of young gays and lesbians are particularly high and it was within the bounds of possibilities that some participants may have voiced suicidal ideation. I decided that if this did transpire I would ask the respondents to seek help. In the event this proved unnecessary.

### **Misinformation regarding safer sex**

Due to the serious nature and consequences of misinformation, in order to discharge my professional responsibilities, I did not directly take the role of educator in this matter, but had a supply of useful material on hand for all participants.

### **Informed consent**

I met with all the respondents prior to the research to discuss the issues. All the respondents participated with full knowledge of the purpose of the research.

## 6.9 Analysis of the Data

My initial analysis was based on Denzin's (1997) approach to analysis, which includes *bracketing, construction, and contextualising*. Bracketing is the location of key phrases that address the phenomena. It includes the interpretation from self and subject and the making of observations from recurring features. Construction is the listing and placing of the brackets in order to show relationships, allowing one to show how the parts become a whole.

Contextualisation becomes the presentation of contrasting stories, the comparison and synthesis of the main themes. Individuals tell multiple narratives which are collected around themes whilst the researcher pays attention to the process. I initially used the NUDIST computer package. This is a system which allows the information to be stored in an index, which is built up like a tree with multiple branches. Through coding, patterns and themes are identified. The whole process, however, degenerated into a fractional disembodied account and any sense of personhood was quickly lost. At that point, I decided to write multiple biographies and ask the respondents during the interviews for their own biographical descriptions. This allowed me to view the respondents as people and brought into play my relationship with them and the emotional context. It allowed the fusion of my field notes with the data. I very deliberately wrote several versions of individual biographies. This was motivated by two reasons. The first was that the respondents themselves presented several versions of themselves. These versions were either based on a historical line, versions of self whilst young compared to versions of

self now or versions of self as presented to various others. The second reason was that although all versions were through my eyes I could focus in on different aspects of their lives and compare within stories as well as across stories. It was this approach which motivated me in chapter eight to start with a biographical account from one of the respondents. This allows inclusion of self within the writing, a device successfully used by Weston (1991). The concept of '*crystallisation*'; which is the emergence of different forms of writing within the text, and from different perspectives, acknowledges the multiplicity of different meanings of accounts as described by Richardson, (1994). This was a strategy I employed during the analysis and which is reflected in the presentation of the data chapters.

My analysis of the data involved the bracketing of data in several ways. I started by exploring the themes which had arisen in the interviews. I then further refined this to explore gender differences, so that I could ascertain if, for example, there were differences in how relationships were perceived by the young gays and young lesbians. I then explored whether there were any temporal differences within the interviews, in that I looked at the statements made in the first interview and then compared them to statements in the second interview. The respondents also gave a temporal perspective as they often stated a position that they had held in the past. I then differentiated between those statements made by the young people whose families and majority of friends knew they were gay or lesbian and those whose family and friends did not. This was to try and ascertain if there were differences in the types of relationships the two groups had. The net result coupled with the biographies was that I had several constructions of the data. I

have tried to reflect this in the presentation of the data by using biography, gender differences and past positions or views held by the respondents. As I started to explore the contrasting and coherent themes that arose from the data I constantly went back to the biographical summaries for each of the respondents to ensure that an attempt was made to understand how the themes fitted into the lives of the young people.

I was creating multiple stories. I was attempting to uncover the connections that arose around the stories that were being constructed by my analysis of the respondents' stories. Through my interpretation and elucidation of the stories I was involved in creating a new story.

As Plummer, (1995) put so forcibly and I consider worth quoting at length:

Whatever else a story is it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life; it provides routes into a life, lays down maps for a life to follow, and suggests links between a life and a culture. It may indeed be one of the most important tools we have for understanding lives and the wider culture they are part of. But it is not the life, which is in principle unknown and unknowable (Plummer, 1995; 168).

There is a danger in all of this that I have moved away from an analysis of the wider social picture towards an examination of personal issues. I will revisit hierarchical issues and social processes in the final discussion.

### **6.10 Ensuring Quality**

Although the term validity within research reflects the positivistic values of rigour, qualitative researchers are required to ensure that their findings are credible. The aim of this research is to document the experiences of young gays and lesbians and examine the findings within a symbolic interactionist and psychoanalytical framework. The task then of accurately reflecting the experiences of the respondents is fraught with dangers. The previous discussion on representing difference is what Denzin (1997) labelled the 'crises of representation' whereby the individual's voice is heard through the author's words. This presents a dilemma whereby if we acknowledge the veracity of the respondents' account whilst simultaneously admitting that the respondents' experiences are influenced by social structures that they may not be aware of, there is then an implicit assumption that by examining the respondents' experiences the influence of social structures is apparent. This is further complicated by the introduction of psychoanalytical theory which assumes the existence of unconscious mental processes of which both the respondents and researcher are unaware. Representation becomes not only a balancing act but also a clarification as to how the researcher conducted the study.

Patton (1990) maintains that qualitative studies should address three fundamental questions when writing-up the narrative:

- i. What techniques and methods were used to ensure the integrity, validity and accuracy of findings?
- ii. What does the researcher bring to the study in terms of experience and qualifications?
- iii. What assumptions under-gird the study? (Patton, 1990; 216).

Using these guidelines requires the researcher to ensure that methods used to generate data are fully described and documented in the research. Other writers such as Silverman (2000) and Hammersley (1990) suggest that it is possible to use terms such as validity and reliability within qualitative research. Hammersley (1990) suggests that 'plausibility, relevance, credibility and importance of the topic' should be the criteria in which to ensure validity. He further proposes that the ultimate judge of this process is the academic community (Hammersley, 1992).

The documented descriptions of the process then allow the reader to exercise joint responsibility with the researcher in judging the evidence on which claims are based. Thus an audit is created which can be followed by others so that the reader or other researchers can trace the decision making processes which led to data production and analysis. The researchers' own frames of reference whether influenced by personal experience or knowledge of the subject area should be made explicit through the documentation of any factor which may influence their interpretation of the data.

This process is however problematic in that the authority and power to determine the validity of the research is vested not in the respondents but in academic groups who have a different vested interest in the production of research.

An alternative view would be to dismiss the 'crisis of legitimacy' but in doing so that would leave us with no criteria to assess quality. Denzin (1997) argues that if we do away with terms such as validity we move towards values and politics. However the same question arises as to whose politics and values are represented. It may be a more honest approach such as that employed by Kitzinger (1987) to admit that: 'All scientific writing is necessarily rhetorical. In the absence of linguistic hygiene, our choice is only in the type of rhetoric to use' (Kitzinger, 1987; 31).

It is then, as both Denzin (1997) and Patton (1990) argue, that the researcher's own position should be clarified in relation to the data. That includes both the theoretical influences on the researcher as well as their personal experience, a task which should permeate the entire thesis.

### **6.11 Plan of Data Chapters**

Organising the data into a coherent narrative was a very complex task. At this juncture it may be useful to restate the intention of the thesis. The primary task was to uncover how young gays and lesbians were living their lives. I had three aims which relate to my theoretical position: to uncover the internal world of the respondents; their perceptions of and interactions with the social world; and finally their sexual relationships.

My first task was to explore the intra-psychic scripts of the respondents and apply psychoanalytic theory to the findings. The intention was to ascertain in what ways the intra-psychic scripts of the respondents shaped behaviour, to uncover the intra-psychic scripts and to ascertain the effect of cultural images on their perceptions. My second task was to explore the social worlds of the respondents and to examine the relationships that the respondents had with their social world. The approach that seemed best suited was that of story and symbolic interactionism. Plummer's (1995) approach to Symbolic Interactionism, in my opinion, fits better, conceptually, with psychoanalysis than the approaches to young people's sexuality such as Rotherham-Borus & Langabeer (2001). The focus on relationships arose out my concern that as a group the respondents were under-represented in this type of adolescent research. The use of story as an approach will hopefully allow the respondents more control over the research process. My third task which arose out of the review of the literature on young people was to explore the respondents' sexual relationships. I was acutely aware as I read the accounts by Holland *et al* (1998), Hey (1997), Wight (1996) and Goossens & Marcoen (1999) that young gays' and lesbians' sexual relationships were under-represented in the literature. I wished to ascertain what types of sexual relationships the respondents had and whether there were similarities with their heterosexual peers.

The next three chapters are analysis of the data. Chapter 7 explores private worlds and public journeys, which is a fusion of the respondents' accounts and my reflective field notes. The focus is on the intra-psychic scripts of the respondents and the chapter comprises reflections of past experiences. The whole of the chapter deals with the



respondents' accounts of their emotions. The chapter uses a psychoanalytic approach to understanding and selecting the data whilst acknowledging symbolic interactionist explanations. The chapter starts with the accounts of how the respondents internally conceptualised and explained their sexuality. Gender differences, which are a theme throughout the thesis, are also commented on within this section. The chapter then explores the social and cultural information that the respondents utilised to fashion their views on their sexuality. Then as the intention is to discover how young gays and lesbians live their lives the chapter examines the relationships that the respondents had at this time in their life. The intention in this chapter is to explore how the respondents interpret the world around them as related to their concept of sexual self.

The eighth chapter explores the themes of relationships with friends and family which arose out of the analysis of the data. This is ongoing and describes both present and past experiences and is based on the construction of stories. This chapter starts with the autobiographical account. The last data chapter explores love, gender differences in relationships and the future aspirations of the participants. This chapter is based on an examination of the types of sexual scripts that the young gays and lesbians utilised to explain their actions.

## **6.12 Biographies**

To aid the reader in understanding the lives of the respondents I have included a brief biography of each of the respondents. The information included was provided by the respondents in response to the question: 'How would you like to be described?' as well as

containing information gleaned from the interviews. I have also included some of my perceptions of the respondents in an effort to give some life to the factual descriptors. The biographies are presented in the order that their comments appear within the data chapters. I have tried to be as brief as possible in my descriptions to prevent identification. Many of the respondents repeated themselves in the interviews and often did not finish sentences. I have reproduced their comments from the transcripts and made no attempt to Anglicise or correct their English.

**Barbara** is 17 years old and lives with a male gay friend in rented accommodation. She was born and brought up in Edinburgh by a variety of foster parents. She is at present unemployed. Since coming out she has been active in young gay and lesbian politics. She has in her words *under gone an image change since coming out*. She has shaved her hair and has stopped wearing skirts. She has had psychological problems which have led her to cut herself. She has had some girlfriends and during the research her relationship with her girlfriend broke up causing her distress. She has never had intercourse with a male. The majority of her friends are gay males. She has a very broad colloquial Scottish accent which I have tried to replicate phonetically in the transcripts e.g. she would say she was fi Edinburgh rather than from. I conducted three interviews with Barbara. She appeared to me as a very vivacious young woman who had plenty to say.

**Colin** was the youngest respondent and was 16 years old and at school. He lives with his mother having moved to Edinburgh as a child. He had his first sexual relationship with another male friend when he was 10 years old. He had never consciously thought about

his sexuality until recently. He didn't classify himself as gay but saw his sexuality as being fluid and thought it would be possible to have a relationship with a woman. He had numerous sexual encounters usually with older men in public places. He differentiated between love and sex within his relationships. I found him a very quiet, gentle and intense young man whose comments on friendship were remarkable.

**Anne** was 17 years old at the time of the first interview and at school; she subsequently attended Edinburgh University. She had been born and brought up in Edinburgh. She was the first person in her family to go to university. Her parents were aware of her sexuality. She was in a relationship with Carol. She appeared quiet and studious and a very feminine-looking woman, and asked numerous questions off tape.

**Carol** was 17 years old. She was brought up a few miles outside Edinburgh. She had left school and worked for a year prior to going to Edinburgh University. She had also gone back to school to gain more qualifications. Her parents were aware of her sexuality and relationship with Anne. She described herself as a feminist. She appeared as a strong, articulate young woman with a good sense of humour. She had numerous conversations with me off tape about relationships. I had three interviews with her.

**Eric** was 19 years old and brought up in Edinburgh. He described himself as having early transvestite desires but now was gay. He was at university in Edinburgh. He had a very

isolated childhood. His interviews were full of contradictions and he came across to me as a very confused young man.

**Ernie** was 18 years old and was at university. He had spent time in New Zealand which he saw as a more liberal environment than Scotland. He described his family life as very happy and supportive. He had a boyfriend but didn't wish to live with him. He was very interested in educating teachers about the problems of young gays and lesbians. He came across to me as an articulate and pleasant young man.

**Cathy** was 19 years old and attending Edinburgh University. She was brought up in Edinburgh and lives with her mother, who is unaware of her sexuality. She described her childhood as isolated. She has not had any sexual relationships. She was a very quiet and shy individual who found the interview difficult.

**Bill** was at school and was 17 years old. His parents knew about his sexuality but he had had an unfavourable response from them. He described his family as typical middle class. He had initially thought that if he was gay he would die of AIDS. He was full of chat and I had three interviews with him. He moved away from Edinburgh after leaving school to — in his words — *escape home*.

**Frank** was 19 years old and lived in Perthshire. He had used the internet to meet other gay men and subsequently lived with a guy for two years. He was thrown out of the

house by his mother but was still supported by his father. His parents were separated. He has had numerous male relationships since he broke up with his boyfriend. He was extremely helpful and downloaded all his internet chat data for me. He spent time introducing me to the world of on-line male dating.

**Diane** was 19 years old and was brought up in a variety of places outside the UK until she was 12 years old. She lived in the North East of Scotland until moving to Edinburgh to go to college. Her parents were unaware of her sexuality. She has had relationships with men but sees herself as a lesbian. She was not in a relationship at the time of the interview.

**Mark** was 18 years old and is the story that is used as an exemplar. He was still at school. He spent most of his childhood on his own and had a disrupted relationship with his parents. He talked at length during the interviews with very little prompting from myself.

**Alan**, 20 years old, was my first interview participant. He announced that he had been a fire setter whilst young. He was brought up outside Edinburgh and had an isolated childhood. His parents were unaware of his sexuality. He was the most negative of all the respondents about his sexuality. My field notes recorded that this was a most difficult interview.

**Elizabeth** was 19 years old and at college with a part time job. She was brought up in the North of Scotland. She had an early sexual experience with another girl aged 15 years old. Her parents are aware of her sexuality. She has had numerous relationships with men. She was very questioning during the research and politically motivated.

**Doris** was 18 years old and brought up in Perthshire. Her parents were unaware of her sexuality. She has a steady girlfriend. She was at university in Edinburgh. She used to describe herself as bisexual. When asked to describe herself she remarked that no one would know she was a lesbian as she was too feminine-looking.

## Chapter 7

### The Beginning, Alone, Intra-psychic Scripts

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were; I have not seen  
As others saw; I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I loved I loved alone.  
(Edgar Allen Poe)

#### 7.1 Introduction: The Ingredients and the Story

The major difficulty I faced whilst writing up the data was how to convey the multiplicity of voices within one coherent voice without reducing the voices to a homogenous mass. Usually stories contain a beginning, middle and an ending. They have a sense of coherence and structure that makes sense to the writer and reader. Life stories are slightly different in that the retelling of the story allows the narrator to constantly change their interpretation of events in the light of new evidence or a new situation. This is evident when one examines the data from both sets of interviews. The life stories of the respondents are emergent, unfinished and dynamic. The respondents in this research are at the beginning of their life stories and have not all reached a stable sense of coherence or conclusion about who they are. These stories were also told to me in a unique situation, a research interview, and as such had not previously been recounted by the informants in this entire form. They had not heard their own story.

Whilst reading and listening to the stories I was struck by the sense of having a lot of ingredients and no idea of how to bake the cake or even what kind of cake. Further reflection made me consider that this may be the position the respondents were in. How do the respondents draw a sense of coherence in who they might be? They walk in a landscape that in one sense was familiar but now at odds with their reflections on self. The landscape of their childhood framed in heterosexual relationships and constructs does not now meet their new ideas of self. How do they find that self and create new relationships? They are faced with contradictory information from the external world, a world in which the public discourse of sexuality is framed as heterosexual and they are different, others. To make matters more complex they are also the same; they are young people in an adult world finding their way, a commonality they share with their peers. They inhabit similar social spaces. Then there is the discourse with self, their internal world and the emotional roller coaster when they swing from one understanding to another. This results in a sense of riding along a roller coaster not quite knowing what will happen next.

The data that were collected become the ingredients of the cake, which is the story that unfolds in the following chapters. The data can be conceptualised in three distinct parts. The first interview is an exploration of their life till now and explores their internal reflections on sexuality. The second interview is their lives at present and examines how they form relationships with the same and opposite sex, their relationships with parents and experiences at school. The third chapter discusses issues of gender and includes



gender differences and constructs of gender and sexual relationships. In addition the respondents recount their views of what the future may bring.

I decided not to present the data as male and female stories and create yet another dichotomy upon which their lives could be judged but present the narratives together and discuss the issues of gender separately. This is because primarily the strategies employed and the internal reflections from both sexes were very similar. In addition some of the issues of gender difference were in relation to their heterosexual peers and had implications with regards to their social lives.

I have chosen to explore this data through relationships to move from a view of identity as merely external relationships of social practice but to include the internal world of the respondents; that is the thoughts and feelings the respondents debated within their heads and how, through this process, the respondents experienced their emerging identities. It is the relationships, whether with self or others, that bind the ingredients together to give the respondents a sense of who they are. Sexual identity cannot be seen in isolation from the development of a notion of self, as we are not fragmented entities.

These stories cannot be understood without a discussion of the landscape in which the stories took place. As Connell (1996) argues, life histories are an excellent way in which to examine social change. The biography I have included of all the respondents should provide the reader with a framework in which to examine the social worlds of the

respondents. It is pertinent at this point to mention also that during some of the data collection there was a vociferous anti-homosexual campaign orchestrated by a national businessman in opposition to lowering the age of consensual homosexual acts.

Life histories produce rich and varied data and it is tempting to explore the breadth and miss the depth and thereby lose valuable insight. This story I tell of their lives therefore has a coherence, which is structured by my interpretations. It is not necessarily the same structure as recounted by the respondents to explain their lives, as their aim in telling their story is different. The aim of this story is to present a snapshot of a period in the life journey of the respondents. A useful metaphor would be for the reader to consider all the respondents as snowflakes, each unique and special yet composed of the same elements and my presentation as a snow sculpture, a bringing together. This bringing together to create form is not the only construction that is possible.

The data are presented in the following fashion; the data on what the respondents discussed *as* having gone on *in their head* prior to public acknowledgement is dealt with in this chapter. This data is the intra-psychic script of the respondent relating to their thoughts and emotions pertaining to their sexuality. I have chosen this way of presenting the data to underline the notion that ideas of sexual self and social self exist side by side. They are located within both the individual and their social milieu.

As Simon (1996) argues:

Intrapsychic life has to be seen as socially contingent, the sexual is put to social and psychic use (Simon, 1996; 42).

The focus of this chapter is the intrapsychic scripts that were recounted as I asked the respondents to reflect on what was going on 'in their heads' during the period no one knew they were gay or lesbian. The chapter explores the influence of gay and lesbian images on the respondents' perception of what it meant for them to be gay or lesbian. In addition the relationships they formed with peers, whilst their sexuality remained private, is discussed. Psychoanalytic terms are also used to describe the dynamics that are occurring.

## **7.2 Starting the Journey: The Respondents**

I started all the interviews with the general invitation to the respondents to tell me a bit about their childhood years during primary school. I wanted to know how they had started their journey. What was evident during this general biographical data was that the respondents' reflections were on the most part related without any reference to sexuality and were ordinary childhood stories of going to school. That is not to say that the stories were the same, as the range included respondents from broken homes to ones with very stable, loving childhoods. It wasn't until they discussed friends that the issues of gender, rather than sexuality, appeared.

*The girls were too girly for me; they would huddle and giggle in the corner. Barbara*

These thoughts about gender became a preoccupation with most of the females as they became sexually aware. This was not as apparent in the stories from the male respondents; their preoccupations were more centred on sexuality and surfaced much later when they were moving between social worlds.

With the male respondents who noticed gender when they were younger it was similar to that of the female respondents.

*And in the back of my head I always knew I was different. 'Cause when the guys were off running and jumping and punching each other I was going, 'Let's make a play.' Although I liked running and jumping and stuff, it was always just for fun, not for going ooh grr, kick you in sort of things. Not making much sense. Colin*

These dissatisfactions by both male and female respondents and observations about gendered positions are no different from those found by Holland *et al* (1998) and Gordon *et al* (2000) when they examined young people and heterosexuality. They also had very stereotypical views of gender positioning. However, the significance of these inner observations is different in that it becomes linked to their notion of sexual identity, rather than their sense of social gender positioning.

I had expected to find lots of evidence of the rewriting of their life stories, where past behaviours were re-evaluated from new positions. The only evidence of that was as above where their gender behaviour was reinterpreted in the light of their current sexuality.

Colin and Elizabeth recounted a story that moved from childhood to being sexually active without pause. This move from childhood to sexual awareness occurred when Colin was 10 years old and Elizabeth was 15 years old. There were two features of note about their stories; one was that the respondents continued their story without prompting towards a discussion of their sexual lives. More importantly, there appeared to be little reflexivity which involved any angst. I was struck by the similarity of young heterosexual life stories. There was no separation of sexual and social self. It was as if they moved from non-sexual childhood to being gay in a seamless fashion.

These two respondents had little or no private musings on the nature of their sexuality prior to enactment. However, on enactment the process of reflection on the meaning of their behaviour commenced. Their first sexual experience will be documented separately as their experiences had an initially different starting point. The majority of the respondents however, prior to enactment, did have a private world where they tried to make sense of how they felt. In this private world they attempted to reconcile their feelings with images of who they were meant to be.

### **7.3 Private Worlds**

At this point in their stories, the respondents have not yet fully acknowledged to self the direction of their sexuality, either because they don't know the words to use or have reasons for inaction. I will discuss later the reasons put forward by the respondents as to why they were reluctant to acknowledge they might be gay.

At this point in the respondents' lives there is no social action in which to practise their sense of sexual self. It is at this juncture that there is a divergence between the experiences of their heterosexual peers, who are engaged in dating behaviours and negotiations with the opposite gender, and the respondents. The respondents nevertheless are in a social environment where one of the main concerns is the making of friendships. Thus, there is a dilemma: how do they develop a sense of sexual self, which is different from what is going on round about them, but at the same time maintain a sense of belonging? It is this dilemma in particular that will be explored in the section on relationships prior to sexual self-enactment.

The respondents are faced with several choices and dilemmas during this period. Initially how are the feelings for the same sex recognised and explained to themselves? What then are the respondents to do with their feelings for the same sex when they cannot be admitted or enacted?

The initial recognition of the feelings for the same sex in some of the respondents becomes a central motivation in their search for self. They are defining themselves by feelings, not actions and not responses; it is all in their heads. How do they make sense of the feelings, what strategies can they use and what information is available? Up until that point all of their life had progressed through a taken-for-granted heterosexual world. It is this world that is the backdrop for some of the initial reflections by the participants. The information they have available to frame themselves is heterosexual; this may explain why some of the confusion in this stage for the girls is about gender. They interpret the feelings they have for their own sex as being because somehow they are male.

*Every time I ever thought about her I would imagine myself as being a boy. And I thought that was really ... and I never thought anything of it. I probably had heard the word like gay or lesbian or something like but never really thought about it. Anne*

*Em, when I was about 15 I remember I had a dream that I kissed a, what was it, what was her name? You know the girl in *Sleeping with the Enemy*, em, Julia Roberts, when she was dressed up as a boy. Cause there was a scene when she was you know seeing her mother or something in the hospital and she was dressed up as a boy. So I had dreams of kissing her. I thought, that's strange. Carol*

They appear to be making sense of emotional and sexual feelings for the same sex within the heterosexual landscape, which gives the message men are attracted to women

therefore they must be in some way male. They are either the male or the other female is somehow male. In psychoanalytic terminology what they are doing is a transfer of emotional self into another body, either as subject or object.

That none of the male respondents admitted to any thoughts of being female is significant. However, one male respondent when discussing his realisation that he was gay recounted the following.

*Eric: I'm trying to remember. I think initially it's cause, all my friends were becoming more and more interested in girls and I was becoming more and more interested in what they were wearing. I suddenly thought mm. that's strange. And I thought about it more and more and just realised it's transvestite.*

AR: And.

*Eric: No transsexual tendencies, just transvestite.*

AR: So, I mean what did that mean for you at that point in time?

*Eric: It was scary. But em, I was terrified. I thought I was a freak initially. But I just, after time, spent maybe 3 or 4 months, I just settled in. And I thought. This is cool. This is what I'm going to be.*

AR: And at that point, the focus of your sexual desire was on clothes?



*Eric: Yes, very much.*

*AR: And totally female clothing?*

*Eric Yes.*

What Eric did was to objectify his feelings and transfer them onto female clothes. This is a rather different strategy than the subjectification, which had been done by the two women. The strategy may be different, but the initial starting point is the same, that is the desire to make sense of the emotions within a structure where one cannot practise the emotions. This reinforces both Freud's and Simon's observations that desire can be transferred onto others as well as objects.

One of the strategies employed by both the male and female respondents was to translate their interest in the same sex as a desire to be like the person they were viewing. This process of identification is described by Ernie:

*So, and one of the ways I kind of looked at it was, like, if I ever, like magazine photos of men that were really attractive, I wouldn't think, I'm attracted to them. I just think, I really envy these people I really do. That's the sort of thing. Ernie*

Peers also used the same process of rationalisation and explanation to explain their behaviour. Carol recounted how she used to have a crush on a different girl each week and would follow them around.

*All this group of friends at High School knew and they just thought, yeah just idolising an older girl or whatever, or just wants to make friends, that kind of thing. Carol*

For Carol this was the safest interpretation of her behaviour by her peers, as to be labelled 'Lezzie' is a term of abuse and would have led to the risk of social exclusion. Within this study, the respondents recounted childhood tales of 'gay', 'lemon' (lesbian) and 'poof' being used as derogatory terms for some of their peers, an issue which will be returned to.

Continuing the discussion on the emotions, at this point the emotions were not just attractions, but were also realisations of the lack of attraction or a stronger feeling of discomfort with the opposite sex.

It appears from the data that most respondents avoided sitting down and consciously thinking about their sexuality, but that they were struck by 'feelings'. The use of the word 'feelings' at the time of the interviews didn't strike me as odd, I recognised from my own experience what was being said. It wasn't until I tried to make sense of the data on the 'feeling' that I realised that this 'feeling' was not a unitary thing. It appears that the respondents are using the same word to describe a myriad of different positions. My

attempts to elucidate some of the notions of 'feelings' was problematic as the respondents are describing a point in their lives where they didn't know what was going on inside themselves. There were different types of feelings, either a discomfort with the opposite sex or a desire for their own sex. For some of the respondents these feelings had no name. These feelings the respondents recounted would suggest that they are innate feelings which are then given structure and substance through their interaction with the social world. This process is complex and dependent on the respondent's access to different forms of information within the social world. What is worth reiterating is that although the respondents may have access to the same information how they personally translated the information and their feelings was in an individualistic manner.

*I suppose it was because I didn't really feel comfy with guys like in a sexual way. I'd feel comfy with them as long as I knew they weren't trying to come on to me, because I wasn't trying to come on to them. Not that anybody'd want to come on to me but. Em, I didn't feel comfy with them like sexually but I'd felt comfy that. I felt comfy with them like as pals to kick around a ball, but like I felt more comfy with girls that, not that I'd ever had sex with a girl before. Barbara*

*I mean I sort of knew that I liked men to be honest. But I didn't think of it in a sort of emotional way. It was more in a physical way. Do you know what I mean? I mean I still at that time, well like felt things for girls. Do you know what I mean? But not, not in a sort of physical sense, but I wouldn't sort of; I couldn't like make the connection somehow. I didn't ever make it. It was like that was just something else. It was like a sort of perversion inside kind of thing. It wasn't that I would make the link between that and*

*being gay. As far as I was concerned they were completely different things. And I didn't even really think that I might be gay until I was about maybe 15 or something like that. It didn't even occur to me that I was. Just, I don't know why. Mark*

The route to the recognition that one is different didn't entirely come from feelings, but also from social behaviour.

*And about 4th year I realised I didn't actually have any other friends apart from her, which was rather strange. Cathy*

The other route was the recognition that somehow they were seeing the world in a different way.

*It must have been like the first gay kiss on television or something. Everyone in the house went eeh, and I just went really? So I sort of thought hey this, they're all having a different reaction to this. Didn't think these words, I just thought. I just don't know what I was thinking but I just thought right, I quite like that. That looked interesting. I'd like to try that maybe one time. Bill*

Several of the male respondents recounted similar stories of realising they were more interested in images of men than their peers. That was one of the first indications to them that they were different.

*I remember being in my aunt's and she just had this male nude calendar. I had to keep on going back to have a look. And I was like; I wonder why this is? And basically blanked it from my mind for a lot of the time. Ernie*

What is being said in all of these examples is that issues of difference arose from a juxtaposition of internal emotions and an understanding of how they were operating differently from the social world. It brings in to focus the notion that it is through experience that we gain an understanding of who we are. The respondents have become aware of an aspect of self that they were previously unaware of, and are faced with exploring these new notions of self against a backdrop of a hostile society. In doing so, they risk their emotional self. They have the choice to close down the newly discovered feelings in order to protect their social self and emotional self. Viewing the data from both a psychoanalytic perspective and a symbolic interactionist perspective highlights that the respondents protect their psyche as well as their social status. The respondents operated ego-defence mechanisms, of transference and subjugation. The respondents were aware of the disjunction between their emotional world and that of their peers. What is interesting and becomes apparent as this story develops is how the respondents dealt with their new emerging sense of self.

One of the ways in which individuals can strengthen new emerging notions of self is to identify with a larger group (Deaux & Martin, 2003). When this is done there is safety in numbers, reinforcement of parts of self and a set of social actions to engage with. It is this notion that prompted my initial interest in how the respondents viewed being gay.

#### **7.4 What is This Thing Called Sexuality?**

I had asked all the respondents to recount what they had thought being gay meant, during the time that no one knew they were gay. I was interested in what images they had used to fashion their identity. It is in this respect that society has changed; there are numerous gay characters on television, in popular soaps and dramas. This depiction of gay characters as social beings provides information for the respondents on social actions. This is a different source of information than that provided by friends' comments and written material, which will be discussed later. The information presented is visual and this serves two functions. Firstly they can compare how they look in contrast to the gay characters. Secondly, they witness behavioural repertoires. It is often discussed and written that it is easier to be gay now than ever before as our society is seen as more liberal, there are more role models, more support and less discrimination. These comments are written by older gays looking back and imaging, if only all these images had been available when they grew up. It is also based on the premise that more means better. It is a view that may mean older gays discount the issues faced by younger people exploring their sexuality and have scant understanding of the plethora of choices facing a young person.

In being a young man there is a profound difference in growing up gay in today's world. It is perhaps ironic that one of the factors responsible for the increased public awareness of being gay is AIDS. The metaphors surrounding AIDS and the public discourse have been well documented (Sontag,1989) and that these metaphors and discourses have entered the identity of young men is not surprising.

*And all the role models that I even remember in like films or anything, there was always someone dying of AIDS or confused about their sexuality, and roles killed off or sent away. Which I thought was, I thought was horrendous, 'cause I thought, oh my life's gonna be terrible. I'm gonna make friends and be sent away. I'm gonna die of AIDS. It'll be terrible. Um, so it was all bottling up inside me when I was about 15. I'd seen all these terrible role models. Bill*

This was by no means an unusual statement and in some form or another AIDS or safer sex was mentioned by most of the male respondents. The association of emerging identity with death can be seen on various levels. There is the death of the old heterosexual self and corresponding fear of death of one's social life: that one would be ostracised, sent away, shunned by one's peers and family to end one's life lonely and isolated. There is also the actual fear of bodily death, that they may develop AIDS and die if they engaged in any sexual acts. For some of the respondents, this manifested in a fear of engaging in sex, for others it was the route to knowledge about their sexuality.

*I was very interested in safe sex for some reason. I would always pick lots of information on that. Always go to the safe sex areas and read up what I could cause I wanted to know. I do remember reading an awful lot of stories that other folk had written about sex or just about life in general. Frank*

I had expected that more of the group would have accessed the internet, and it is worth highlighting that for Frank all of his information came from the net and involved on-line chats with other gay people. The role models that he had access to were on-line and as such he admitted he did not reflect on what being gay was. I had access to a large amount of data from Frank in the form of his e-mails and on-line discussions and at this point consider that an examination of this data is beyond the remit of this work, but would consider that future research into young gay lives included the Internet.

The visual pictures from soaps and films were not as positive as I had expected.

*Well you get all those stereotypes on TV and films and things, like the flamboyant, effeminate, arty type, or big men in leather with moustaches and things like that. But that, that was pretty much the only picture I had. Eric*



On discussing *Eastenders*.<sup>11</sup>

*They had Tony and Simon and that was I think the first conscious time I thought, is this what I'm supposed to be? I thought, oh dear god, please say no. 'Cause I remember Simon being so annoying and so irritating, boring. I just thought he was horrendous. And Tony being so confused and terrible. Because I knew then that I wasn't confused. I knew that this is what I was. Bill*

For some of the women in the study the infamous lesbian murderer in *Brookside*<sup>12</sup> was a cathartic source.

*And this is sad, but it wasn't until I was watching Brookside and it was like the Beth Jordash scenario and I thought, 'She's a girl.' And I thought, 'Maybe that's what I'm like?' And I thought, 'No, no.' And I kind of forgot about it for a couple of weeks. But then as I started like going out more and like all my pals would be kissing boys and you'd just have to dae the same thing. I started thinking. I don't want to kiss them then, I want to kiss them. And I thought, '... like Beth.' And that's when it all started. Anne*

The other images available are pornographic.

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<sup>11</sup> *Eastenders*, a television soap opera

<sup>12</sup> *Brookside* is a channel 4 soap programme

*I thought, 'Oh my god, lesbians are like really dirty and everything. I thought, 'Oh right.'  
And like they dae nude shows and everything. Carol*

During the previous year, there had been numerous television programmes with lesbian characters and most of them had red hair, another difference to help the viewer identify them. It had been something that I had noticed, but the effect that it had on one young woman was slightly different.

*Well I always like had the image that lesbians were fat people wi ginger hair and I was like, aw no they're aw gonna be horrible. You seen them in Woman's Own. And they had curly ginger hair and big red cheeks. And you saw them on the telly and they were big fat things with short-backed hair that looked just like me. And so does my English teacher. And I was like aw no. Anne*

The respondents' perception and ability to reject or reconstruct the images that were presented altered as they gained more self-confidence. One respondent who had utilised ideas on feminism to express her views in public had fashioned a very different view of being a lesbian as being a rejection of gendered roles.

*I thought, my image of lesbians wasn't like butch dyke or anything. It was more these women that just did what they want. Not used to you know the ordinary... section of women being a wee housewife. It was these women that were really powerful because they just did what they want. I was like that's scary for them to be that powerful and just do that to other women. Carol*

Examining all of the material on visual images and the effect it had on the respondents was problematic, as the majority had little or no recollection of watching gay characters when they were formulating their ideas of sexuality. On reflection I realised that it had only been in the last two years that there had been a plethora of gay characters in programmes that they would have watched. Unless the respondent had been at the point that they were visually sensitive to the images, they would not have noticed. For those who did notice, as recounted above, the effects were dramatic. Visual images do have one advantage over written material in that television is more accessible to younger people and can in many cases be viewed in private. The amusing stories told by some of the respondents of watching Gaytime television in secret and channel hopping as parents appeared, underline that television is one of the main sources of information that young people can control.

## 7.5 Written Information

Access to written material by the respondents was limited and they were of two types. There were semi-fictional accounts and gay magazines. One of the female respondents was an avid reader and recounted this story she read.

*And she actually moved to Manchester to feel happy with being gay, which I wouldn't. I don't know, it didn't give me a very good idea. Well that's a bit strange having to actually move to be accepted for something. Em, so I knew that people were worried about it. It was something that people didn't sort of. You know they had to think a lot before actually telling anybody about it. Diane*

One of the male respondents had access to gay magazines, which was unusual in that the majority would not have dared go and buy one.

*It was Attitude magazine, and it's sort of a youth. I don't know this youth, it's fairly typical mag gay, male magazine, except it's for a gay audience. And I felt that it's for, one thing it did was it wasn't, something wasn't negative about the gay lifestyle. It was upbeat, uplifting, em, and it gave me more confidence. I thought there's some positive aspects of this lifestyle. It's not all doom and gloom. There are lots of other people out there. And reading that I was, mmm, you know I don't feel quite as bad about who I am. I started feeling more confident. Ernie*

Several of the respondents recounted how they had found it difficult to access written material or find sources of information. It was not until they had contact with other gays and lesbians that they were able to access sources of information via gay groups.

### **7.6 Information From Friends and Family**

I have not included information about formal sex education in School as for the majority this occurred when they had already decided they were gay. I was interested in what messages they took from peers and family. With peers, this was very contradictory. There were positive statements made about gays and lesbians and support.

*Aha. And I'd always go on about like feminist issues and stuff like that all the time. I remember we were drunk and my friend's dad, the one I told you about. I remember he was sitting with his friend one night and we came in drunk and we were sitting there and he started saying something, women in the kitchen. And I honestly must have been shouting at him for about an hour or something. And then we all went to sleep and when we woke up in the morning he's like making us breakfast and he's going. I said something and he went. 'Aw shut it you ya lesbian.' I was like (aghast) And ma pal's like, 'Dinnae call her that. So what if she wis anyway?' And I was like. And em that was that. Anne*

Prior to public acknowledgement of their sexuality, when the respondents were faced with anti gay statements, their peers offered support in a variety of ways either dismissing

the notion that their friend was gay or in defending an individual's right to be gay. On one level, their peers' responses were supportive, but there was in addition a constant use of gay and lesbian as a derogatory term.

*One of my friends um, I'm totally convinced he was straight, but about from first year till the end of sixth year he was constantly taunted about being gay, because he was at Scout Camp and sleeping in a sleeping bag next to another guy and this other guy shouted out. Derek, stop feeling my leg. And from that point on his life was just constant taunts about being gay. He got beaten up for about three or four times. So, that kind of emphasised to me how bad it would be. Eric*

Family life was very different, as there were no conversations that the respondents recounted to me with parents or siblings until public acknowledgement of their sexuality. Later discussion will explore why some parents were told and others were not. This section throws up an interesting point in that unless I had been present and doing ethnographic research focused on family relationships it is difficult to ascertain what happened. This may be that relationships with parents were not the respondents' primary concern at that point.

### **7.7 Taking the First Step**

Everybody who was part of this study by virtue of being in the study had acted on in some way 'the feeling'. They had not all come out or even come in as gays or lesbians.

They had all identified to me as being gay, lesbian or bisexual. The majority of the respondents had had some form of same-sex relationship. I was interested in what they did, when they realised that in some way they were different.

The stories of taking the first step appear to be two types. There is the clearly defined moment when they decided to act on their feelings. There are some for whom it just happened, their stories are less self-reflexive and are dealt with later. For those who had the defining moment there were several types of reasons for delaying action, "*I'll wait till I was older*" was an often-repeated phrase.

This could be explained on two levels. The first level is that the respondent feels that they are not mature enough to make such decisions. The rationalisation is further backed up by the view that "*it could be a phase*".

*Someone who likes the same sex. But I didn't want it. I thought, 'What if it is just a phase. Or what if it is just, a big cliché ..., but I thought, what if I like a guy eventually?' I just didn't want to tell anybody in case I reversed it and they'd already got that thought in their head. Diane*

*I think we were getting one of these weekly encyclopaedia things you build up in health issues and it was like, as you go through adolescence you go through this period of homosexuality. I thought, that's what I'm being in this phase for. Phase. And then I sort of*

*just put it out of my mind after that. I thought, it's just a phase. I'll be out of it soon, and then ok this phase is going on longer and longer. Ernie*

This is a view that was still held by some respondents, in particular those who did not have a defining moment. This view of 'phase' is one that is found in common culture and was repeated to some later when they told their parents. However, as Ernie stated, there does come a point when one starts to wonder when the phase will end and this usually occurs as more and more of their peers develop relationships with the opposite sex. It is perhaps disheartening to consider that despite the plethora of gay stories and images available to young people the notion of 'phase' is still very powerful. The effect on the individual is that they can't legitimise their feelings and create space for their voice to be heard.

The second level of waiting till one was older is structural. They are not yet independent and cannot access the clubs or conduct a private world away from friends and family. This reiterates previous research discussed in chapter 3 (Davis, 1992; Herdt, 1992) that coming out is different from the realisation that one is gay or lesbian and that there are cultural and structural barriers to overcome before an individual can come out. One female respondent recounted amusing tales of how she would imagine how she could meet other lesbians. She would go into the nearest city and see if she could spot them, a strategy that was not successful, but one that occupied a lot of her time. This lack of opportunity results in respondents delaying until they leave home or are in a new social



environment. The majority of respondents did grow up outside major cities and had little or no access to groups, clubs, or pubs. Another reason for delaying was fear.

*"I'd get my head kicked in". Barbara*

*I sort of knew if that anyone in [...] found out I would have been, my life would have been hell. To steal ... quote, I would have been killed with sticks. Um, so, I kind of stopped talking and tried to drift into the background more or less. Um, I just carried out my academic studies and left the socialising to other people. Eric*

The fear was of physical harm and social ostracisation. This is a perceived stigmatisation based on their knowledge from newspapers and comments they had heard others make and was not as yet based on any comments made directly about them. The notion of stigma ties in with the images that they had available to them when trying to decide who they were.

This finding is reinforced by Plummer (1989) when he discusses that there was a lack of gay or lesbian models available for young people growing up in the 80s. The situation is now different in that mainstream television such as *'Brookside'*, has included major gay characters as part of the story line. Yet still, the dominant discourses that are utilised by the respondents are the fears of physical, social harm and that homosexuality is a phase that they are going through .

At this point in their lives, stigma was not reinforcing identity because they were not part of the gay group but created a barrier. They examined the information and when rejecting parts of the perceived stigma then doubted who they were. Were they in fact gay because they were not like that?

*No. I'd tried to hide them from myself for so long and try and convince myself that it was something else that when I realised that it's like. Yeah intellectually you should be able to say. Oh you know it doesn't matter if male or female. But in the real world it's a pile of crap. Em, and you know it was suddenly it's like everything that I had built my little world on I realised was all bullshit. Mark*

There was also the fear of being trapped.

*Like I was talking to various people like girls but I thought I like guys as well. I don't want to come out as totally gay because I like guys. And then after speaking with people at a support group then you realise that you could actually be in the middle and that encouraged me more to come out. I was able to come out as bi without having to sort of decide for definitely that I was never going to get off with a guy. Cathy*

All the respondents who had not spent time thinking about their sexuality prior to enactment interestingly had the notion of well I could change back. The following story encapsulates many of the numerous feelings and actions that were occurring.

*Alan: I always knew, but I'd recognised what was going on. Then there was the whole... I know it sounds so corny sort of thing. But then there was the whole denial phase, no. No, it can't be. Well maybe I am but. Well that's ok...*

AR: What age were you about then?

*Alan: Em, 15.*

AR: And this coincides with your feeling of no friends?

*Alan: I think so actually, yeah, sad as it sounds. I had friends, but I didn't feel close to any of them.*

AR: Did they know what was going on in your head?

*Alan: No.*

AR: Did anybody know what was going on in your head? Was it just some sort of silent debate that was going on in your head?

*Alan: Yeah lots. No I'm very clever about what I say. I had my... I can see my mum probing me, but in a kind of condescending way and no hope in hell of trying to get through to me, I can see them a mile off. I can, I don't know, dismiss the probing as easily as it applies sort of thing.*

AR: So you were you know fencing that off, yeah?

*Alan: Yeah. She never ever said anything. She didn't know. She just thought, I don't know. I don't know what she thought, but I just. I was probably like this when I was at*

*school. I've talked to other people about this as well. Some people have done the same and things. You know it's a case of you just study in order to get your mind off things. I found myself doing that. So in first and second year I didn't really care. You didn't really have much work. I did the best I could, but I wasn't really thinking about it back then. Well I was but I didn't have the desire to pursue it anyway. I was about 13. I didn't really have the desire to pursue the thoughts any further, so I just let them go.*

The overwhelming sense from the above story and the fragments I have presented of this period is of isolation and a sense of being apart, of monitoring their behaviour. This is either because of fear of being found out or trying to bury the thoughts. This has a profound effect on their relationships with others.

### **7.8 Relationships During This Period**

I decided to focus on relationships within this section as I wanted to ascertain what were the social effects of the respondents' private thoughts; how was their behaviour influenced by the discovery and development of their same sex-sexual attractions. In many ways this subtitle is a misnomer in the true sense of the meaning of relationships, because for many of the respondents isolation and withdrawal from social situations and relationships was the strategy they employed to reduce the chance of discovery. Their opportunity for any sort of intimacy, sharing and consequently love was severely curtailed.

More often than not friendship experiences are researched and analysed on gender and power issues, and accounts of male friendship experiences are scarce. Weston's (1991) account of gay and lesbian friendships and families does provide some useful background on later experiences, but does not address the concerns of young gay and lesbians.

The respondents in this study did not neatly divide into gender lines, there were males who had predominately female friends, there were males who had only male friends and avoided all females, and there were those who had no friends or just one. The same could be said of the females in the study. Although intimacy is considered central to most of our lives (Jamieson, 1998) there were those who avoided intimacy.

Whilst trying to unravel data I reflected that what was important was the question: why were there not the usual experiences or categories? It becomes apparent whilst reading the stories that a battle between intimacy, disclosure, sexual expression, fear and rejection was being played out. That they made choices is evident. There is no commonality in the social situations of those who chose similar paths and that may be because it is a small study. What is not known are the long term effects of their friendship choices. Zimmerman & Becker-Stoll (2002) found that the development of secure attachment representations are influenced by ego-identity status during adolescence. It may be that whilst trying to develop a sense of self during this period the task of forming secure friendships is problematic. This can be viewed in two ways; firstly because they are unable to devote energy to the task as they are engrossed in the formation of their ego-

identity. Secondly the social situation that they are in limits the opportunities for them to meet individuals whom they feel would be positive about their sexuality.

I did ask all of the respondents to tell me what they thought friendship was and asked them about friends. Colin gives a most succinct account of friendship and one of the nicest I've heard.

*And like to have a good pal you have to be able to tell them and express opinions and things, about things in your life, not just school and what's happening on tv. 'Cause there are more important things. Like how you're feeling and stuff. And like you have to be able to trust your pals as well.. Like tell them stuff, secrets and stuff and um, trust them enough so, like you know they won't go around telling everyone and you know that they would tell you stuff as well if they wanted to. And you have to respect the fact that you will. Obviously you're going to keep stuff private, but you also, if you're a good pal you'll be there for them and listen when they've got something to say to you. Colin*

It is rather obvious that if you wish aspects of self to be hidden from self and others then having friends can become problematic. One can employ several strategies. One can belong to a group of social misfits, safety in numbers, and no need to conform to the majority. This may be a very small group.

*Yeah they were, they were very quiet and shy people and, and I think one of them was gay actually. But he was, they were always very sort of shy sort of rejects of society sort of*

*thing. So, I thought I'll make the effort and I did really well at school. I got everything I wanted. I didn't get everything I wanted on the social side. They were just, I don't know, very superficial people, I thought. I knew I'd been too judgmental, but they were, I always thought you know their values lay in different areas. It was like hockey and rugby and ponies and things like that, yeah. Whereas my friends were the ones who were considered sad. That's the word that was used in those days for what I thought were beautiful people and nice to speak to and intelligent and you know, instead of just the crap that, everyone throwing cakes at each other and things like that. I don't know. Allan*

*socially I had maybe 3 or 4 friends the whole time. And barely spoke for the whole of High School. Eric*

One can become part of the in crowd and fit in. This involves a high degree of social skill and monitoring of one's own behaviour. It is also dependent on peer support.

*as I went to High School I made loads of other friends with different primary schools. And that's when I started mucking about with people and stuff like that. I met some friends who went to [...] primary and I used to go up to [...] when I was in like first and second year. And like we used to get drunk every weekend and childish things like that. Anne*

Getting support from others when not interested in the opposite sex, although she had not told her friends why she wasn't interested, was Anne's experience.

*Mmm? Nah, no really. They were just like, I suppose we were a bit young just even though they were a bit like experimenting their self. They were just like; well whatever takes your fancy. And they were quite supportive at times. They were like; 'Leave her alane.' Like there was this one boy who would no leave me alone. 'Like she doesnae like yi.' (laughs) That was that. Anne*

*Em, I really, I started hanging about with a group of girls and yes it was an entirely female gang. They didn't really mix boys and girls as far as friendships were concerned at that age. Obviously we all got a bit more mature towards the end of school you know. Em, at [...] I would say I had perhaps maybe one lad who I would count as a real friend. But then, but then I'm not using the friend, the term friend loosely. I mean it's you know. I had lots of male acquaintances who I would speak to. Diane*

Having opposite sex friends allows the individual to engage in a wider role-playing repertoire. It is however, a short-term strategy as eventually dating issues arise.

*I'd be playing football and be climbing trees and getting stuck on the railway.' Cause like there was a railway right across the road fae us. Well not actually right across the road but behind the houses across the road. And I'd usually run up it with the guys and run down it. But I got ma foot stuck. I tripped over the rails. There wasn't a train coming or anything. I tripped over the rails and I crapped myself because I thought there was a*



*train coming. It was just them banging further along. They were kicking the rail track. I was like, 'There's a train. There's a train. Help!' So they pulled me up. I was like, 'Thanks'. But I had some good laughs with the guys. Barbara*

Barbara did not recount any intimate discussions with the male gang.

*Pretty much always female friends. I had a couple of male friends, em one of whom is still one of my best friends in the entire world. Um and is far more camp than anyone that I know, but is not gay. He's had like girlfriends and he's just... He hangs with my friends far too much and he picks up all the things and he'll like slap you on the arm and go, 'You bitch.' It's like, 'You're a guy, what you doing?' But my other really close male friend found out I was gay and just went, 'Ok, bye then.' And sort of shimmied off. I still see him every now and again and obviously we chat. But it's a bit annoying. He's the only real friend who did that. Yeah these mainly female friends which my mother despaired. Bill*

Bill may have been at a social advantage in that he was able to develop very intimate relationships with his female friends. He was able to experiment with cross gender patterns of intimacy.

The avoidance of social situations was raised several times by the respondents.

*Male friends. I hung about with them, went shopping. Went to watch a lot of films, cause basically I'm a film fanatic. Um, eh hung about, drank a lot, didn't go to many parties*

*whatever. I had a lot of other, not very close friends who would invite me to parties, and I always found it, I'd always found excuses as to not go. Eric*

*Mark: I kind of kept myself to myself, certainly within secondary school I pretty much spent most of my time on my own. I had a few, I had a friend who I used to live next door to and I kind of made friends in, must have been 3rd year. But certainly for most of second year I totally kept myself to myself.*

AR: So what about all the sort of social activities like going out in the evening and getting drunk and parties and?

*Mark: No I didn't drink, I didn't drink until just before I came to university.*

AR: Parties?

*Mark: No, no. I wasn't.*

AR: Go to the pictures?

*Mark: I wasn't really very sociable at all. I had a, I had a small group of friends who at one point one of them decided that he didn't like me very much, so they sort of buggered off and that was the last I saw of them.*

AR: And were they male or female friends?

*Mark: Male.*

Youth is acknowledged to be a difficult time, as young adults come to terms with new social expectations based on gendered positioning. This is further complicated if one's sexuality raises issues of difference, rejection and there is a distinct lack of role models. It is not surprising that the strategy often employed is to isolate oneself.

### **7.9 It Just Sort of Happened**

All the previous respondents had spent time thinking about what it was to be gay. Elizabeth and Colin entered a same sex relationship without previously thinking about it. It was not until after they had a same sex relationship that they began to explore what being gay or lesbian meant. They had much more fluid conceptions of sexuality, considering it not fixed.

*And she got into bed with me and you know, things kind of happened. You can imagine. So, that was that and for the next week we were pretty much inseparable. Now, my parents, while all this is going on, obviously, obviously they knew, right. You couldn't miss it (sighs) I don't think they were happy with it. In fact, no I know they weren't happy with it cause at the end of the time my mother said, well look. I'll tell you what she actually said to me. She said, if you get found out, I'm gonna deny all knowledge of this, cause you're both still em, 15. And I said to her, well that is just complete bollocks, cause you know there's no lesbian age of consent. It's not illegal, right? And she said, no, no, no, you're under 16. It doesn't count. Just interesting, where, who was right? Where do we stand on that? Elizabeth*

*I ended up going out with [...] after a while, from the age of 10. Well it started off like really just pals and stuff in primary three. And then em we just got really more pally and stuff. And at one point it was like best friends and then after that it was you're not my best pal, 'cause I've got a best pal and you're not the same. But it was more than that. So like I ended up going out with him. Colin*

The above two respondents had entered into a physical relationship with a member of the same sex without prior consideration of this as a possibility. They then both based their view of self as sexual beings on this experience. However, both of these respondents saw their sexuality as fluid and that there existed the possibility for change. Whether that is the case for all individuals who have this life experience is not possible to determine due to the small number of respondents.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

In presenting the respondents' experiences as segments, describing the elements, I could lose the *Gestalt* of the experience. In attempting to separate private and social, it may give the mistaken idea that these are two distinct worlds. My intention is to try and make visible through the words of the respondents the inner discussions, perceptions that occur during a changing part of their lives. I am attempting to bring a voice to the intrapsychic scripts of the young gays and lesbians during this period of their lives. By asking them

what went on in their heads I have asked them to reflect back and then produce a coherent story for me, the audience.

From their accounts the initial starting point for the respondents is the acknowledgement of a 'feeling'. Part of this feeling arose from a perception of being different. The respondents observed that they paid attention to different social stimuli and then perceived that they were somehow different from their peers. The search for the meaning of this feeling within some of the female respondents led to gender confusion.

The naming of this feeling and the acknowledgement of the feeling does not always occur in tandem. There are several structural reasons as to why the respondents were unable to have public acknowledgement of their feelings. Some of the reasons, fear and isolation, delayed the acknowledgement to self.

For some respondents there is a preoccupation about what being gay and lesbian means by constantly comparing oneself to the surrounding information and imagery. The sources of information were given different levels of credence by the respondents.

There is also a desire to remain hidden, which results in a reduction in the level of intimacy they are able to have with their peers. There were several strategies employed during this time: being part of the peer crowd in order to hide, being apart from the peer crowd or having single sex friends.

For others the starting point of their acknowledgement of their sexuality is a relationship 'that just happened'. These respondents then proceed through the same process of trying to incorporate the experience into their notion of self-identity. These themes will be further discussed in the final chapter.

## Chapter 8

### Family and Friends

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had.  
And add some extra, just for you*  
(Philip Larkins)

#### 8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the data that focused on the experiences of the respondents prior to public acknowledgement of their sexuality. The interplay between the respondents' innermost thoughts and their behaviour and the social world were discussed. This chapter takes a different stance than the intrapsychic scripts in the previous chapter. This chapter explores the data from a symbolic interactionist perspective and utilises a respondent's story as the basis of the structure of the chapter. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which the respondents conceptualised relationships, the methods they use to tell others about their sexuality and subsequent the impact of disclosure on their relationships. It is also apparent from the previous chapter that the normative effects of living in a dominantly heterosexual society shape the respondents' views of self. These pressures of heterosexual conformity vary within different social settings and therefore allow the respondents varying levels of space in which to tell others. The social spaces explored in this chapter are family, school, friends and acquaintances. Within each of these settings the respondents faced different pressures to conform and different views of how they should behave. This external conflict and pressure combined with internal emotional turmoil led to some distressing outcomes, homelessness and attempted suicide being two of the outcomes recounted in the interviews.

## 8.2 An Exemplar

Within each of the interviews there are complete stories similar to chapters in a book that can be read as a story in its own right as well as being part of the whole story. For the purposes of illustrating all of the points I wish to discuss in this chapter, I have chosen one such story contained in the larger interview. The story has been edited.

*Mark: So anyway bought, I bought a load of 50 paracetamol and codeine and a pack of 12 ibuprofen. You know I didn't have any intentions of doing anything, you know it was just because I was getting headaches. And then when I got back, by this point I was just basically living at my grandmother's. She lives only a hundred yards up the road from my parents. And, I can't remember. She just said something to me and I was just, was like, I absolutely fucking hate my life. I mean it's like, it's all these people, and they were all miserable. You know I mean they were all content, but none of them looked as though they'd seen happiness for the last 20 years.*

*Suddenly I just totally, something just snapped and I just went up the stairs. I put the stereo on loud. I had Morrissey on. I remember that and. Oh yeah I'd also bought 2 CDs that day. Em, I can't remember what the second one was. I cannot remember what the second. Em, anyway, so I just sat there a carton of milk, a glass, just pouring, taking pills, just, em, took them all and. I mean I remember by the time you know I'd sort of like finished taking them, I, you know, it was a very bizarre experience. Em, you know it was like all sensation you know like touch, everything was so numbed down and you just felt. I can't explain what the feeling was like, but it was, I was just so high.*



AR: I mean what was going through your head at the time? I mean what thoughts were going through your head?

Mark: *I was just like, that's it. Had enough. Not taking, putting up with this shit anymore. Em, it's like you know, started making effort and then you see all these people and, you know they're 30 years older than I am and they're still in the same situation. It's like, fuck it. I'm not taking another 30 years of this.*

AR: And how were you feeling?

Mark: *I felt so happy. It was just everything was released, everything. It was like. I just didn't give a shit. Em, I mean, I kind of, I told. Well I let my grandmother read a little sort of snippet out from like ... book. You know you get a little notepad and you know get friends to write in it when you leave school. Em, and anyway this one you know said quite blatantly that yes I was gay and she was like. So is that what's wrong? And I was like, duh. What do you bloody think? Em, and anyway I made her promise she wouldn't tell my grandfather, and five minutes later she did. So at that point, it was like you are never getting told anything again. But I thought, well you know it doesn't really matter.*

AR: Is this why you've taken the tablets?

Mark: *Oh yeah. I mean I was totally off my face. But anyway you know eventually they, you know realised. They knew I'd bought all the pills and then they put two and two together. Then my grandmother went mental em; you know taken to the hospital you know. Em the didn't actually pump my stomach. It was one of the charcoal based suspension solutions and actually I remember just complaining that it was too damned sweet. Apart from that, I*

*thought it was really quite nice and which is so bizarre. Em, but I remember the next morning because of the drugs they put me on to sort of you know save my liver I was so ill. And I remember when the, you know the little show and tell, when you know the big doctor comes round with the little medical students, and the doctor just saying. You know taking pills just isn't the answer. And I just was in such disbelief. And I just wanted to say. What the fuck would you know? But I was, just felt so bad I just like euh. And I remember that so clearly. I was just so astonished that he had said that. But you know, so that was that.*

What does this story tell us? On the simplest level, it is a story of pain and self-destruction, which is an extreme version of all the other stories that were recounted in the interviews. However, this story highlights several issues. It portrays a view of the future as hopeless, of never achieving happiness based on a perception of the present. The final data chapter will discuss the other respondents' views of the future in more depth and continue this theme.

The respondent recounts the feeling of *I just snapped*. Other respondents use similar words, e.g. *explode*, to introduce their story of the first time they told someone. There are within the other stories more in-depth explanations of the pressures to conform and the conflicting emotional turmoil they experienced. These stories are the starting point of this chapter.

The respondent is living with grandparents because the parental relationship has broken down. The respondent in this case had felt unable to relate to his parents and tell them what was happening in his life. Although the respondents in the study came from a myriad of different family set ups, from single mothers, foster parents, stepfathers, separated fathers

with no contact, there were universal stories of difficulties in telling parents or parent. These stories constitute a section of this chapter.

The respondent told his grandmother who then told someone else. This is not an uncommon experience. The consequences of others knowing whom you didn't tell impacted on many of the respondents' lives, in particular at school. This phenomenon raises several issues, of control, who to trust and how to manage others knowing, which require further discussion. There is also included within this story the admission of being gay or lesbian in response to a question where it is not the respondent who initiates the disclosure. This happened to several of the respondents.

Finally, the respondent meets a professional; in this case a member of the medical fraternity and no support is forthcoming. In the majority of cases, the respondents in the study had access to educational professionals as an alternative to parents and as a source of support. There are numerous stories of how this did not transpire.

All of the above issues form the basis of this chapter. There is, however, one area not covered in this story, that is an account of sexual relationships. The final chapter examines the data on sexual relationships and meeting other gay and lesbian people.

### **8.3 Telling Others**

Before an examination of the main bulk of the data takes place, there is a need to explore the multiple layers of telling others. This is because without an appreciation of the complexity

of the situation, the stories may be viewed as coming-out stories and thus related only to self-identity. Whence in part, the stories reflect how hetero-normative forces shape every day actions of the respondents.

Telling others about your sexuality is usually referred to as coming out, but it is apparent from the above story that it is rather more complex than a movement from a straight lifestyle to a gay or lesbian one. The transition, if it can be called that, as transition implies a change from one state to another, belies the lived in reality of the respondents as being perched between different social versions of themselves. Coming out fails to acknowledge the process of entering a gay or lesbian sub-culture and the management of that; a coming in process. This can be viewed as a process whereby the respondents manage social and sexual relationships as being governed by different norms and expectations dependent on whether they are within heterosexual bound environments or gay and lesbian bound environments. The choices the respondents are able to make within each may be variable and dependent on factors such as support, knowledge and degrees of censorship. These outcomes are discussed throughout this chapter.

Coming out and telling is also not a one off event. The data consists of different coming out and telling stories. From the very first time, to telling one's parents to telling other gay and lesbian people, each of these episodes presents different obstacles for the respondents. There is also a point where the respondents decide not to tell anymore, the need to tell has gone for the moment. The last data chapter will discuss this conclusion reached by some of the respondents.

In summary telling is as much about what is being told as to whom and in what situation. It is about power, relationships and identities. On the wider level coming out stories and telling reflect the society the respondents live in.

#### **8.4 Telling For the First Time**

All the respondents recounted the story of how they told someone for the first time. These stories are epiphanies as they are the first time there is any public acknowledgement of their sexuality. Their internal voice is given substance and they can now fashion themselves anew. They are transformed from a hidden self into a new self with all the concomitant decisions that require to be made regarding relationships and lifestyle.

There are several types of telling for the first time, some involved a planned course of action whereby the respondent seeks out those they know will not reject them and that may include gay or lesbian groups or contacts. Other forms of telling are under the influence of alcohol and are spontaneous. They involved no planning and sometimes the respondents expressed surprise that they told someone. The reactions they faced and the consequences of telling are multiple and complex.

#### **8.5 Telling Friends: The First Time**

This section involves multiple paths to the disclosure of sexuality for the first time and a multitude of reactions to telling. Unplanned telling because of internal pressure was the most prevalent route.

Without doubt, the telling of friends was the most common first disclosure of the respondents' sexuality. For some, the pressure of remaining silent was too much.

*Um, so.... Bottling up inside me when I was about 15. I'd seen all these terrible role models. My dad didn't know anything. I wasn't going near my mother. So I told my best friend.... Told her completely by accident. Didn't mean to. Um just before Christmas.*

Bill

Although most of the respondents did not plan to tell someone, they had all internally rehearsed the possibilities of that action. For many of the respondents, there were fears about what might happen if they told.

*And em I was just scared in case like I told them and they disowned me or something. And I didn't want to lose my friendship with them just because I wanted to be who I thought I wanted to be.* Barbara

The fear expressed above is that the respondent would be more isolated by telling. The internal loneliness that she felt would be transformed into a public isolation, a withdrawal of social contact.

Although many of the respondents expressed fears that they would be rejected by their friends, what the majority found was actually more positive.

*When I first told. The first person I told at school was [...]. And like that reaction I expected off anyone at all but her anyway would be like, sort of like not believe me at first maybe, and then maybe being a wee bit angry and stuff and a bit pessimistic and stuff. But she was actually. She acted like she was really interested about it. Like from then she just takes an interest now and it's this thing that we've got together and it's like really cool. Colin*

For the above respondent the quality of his relationship improved and he was able to emotionally engage with his friend who knew. Although in many cases the reaction was positive, what is crucial to remember is that the respondents all initially perceived that there would be a negative reaction. This perception of a negative reaction altered their behaviour and led to them socially withdrawing and becoming isolated. It is this very bottling up of their emotions that led to the feelings of explosion within the respondents. As human beings, the more we try and not think about something the more our thoughts return to the subject that we are trying to avoid. This situation is not unusual in everyday life. It is, however, a very difficult situation for a young person at school surrounded by peers, who fears discovery.

Inevitably, not all reactions were positive. There were however, in this data, no accounts of direct hostility from those that the respondents chose to tell. The accounts of hostility were from those outside their immediate circle. A more negative reaction was one where the friend withdrew or did not engage with the disclosure.

*Well he was my best friend at school so I. We yeah, I was almost 12. So, we were sort of mucking around as it were. Eh, I think it was then that I sort of said something. Em, he wasn't too impressed, but we kind of fell out of touch after school, so.*

Frank

In one case, the respondent had the experience of telling someone for the first time and then being told that the person was also lesbian. Two first-time experiences, telling and meeting a lesbian.

*I came out to my best friend and she went. 'Are yi?' I went, 'Aye. Are you not gonna run away or something?' She went, 'Why? I'm one too.' 'Aah. My first lesbian encounter.' So I was quite feared about that. But then we're still pals now so I still see her. And she goes out to Planet and stuff and she goes out with [...] fae [...]. So we're the best of pals.*

Barbara

A rather overwhelming experience and not one she expected. To start from the belief that being lesbian is a stigmatised identity that may result in rejection, to then tell and in the process be faced with an embodied version of her fears, produced fear. The unthinkable being what if this lesbian rejected her or worse tried to initiate a relationship. This respondent did what several of the respondents did as she came out and went back in again.

*So I stayed with[...] for 11 months and then he dumped me because he was seeing*



*somebody else (sighs) behind my back. And so I like. I think that made up my mind for me because I wasn't really happy with him because he was pushing me into doing stuff that I wasn't really fond of doing basically so. Barbara*

Another catalyst was needed to move the respondent towards further disclosure of her sexuality. This story highlights that as the respondents reached the stage where their peers were actively engaged in relationships with the opposite sex, the pressure to conform started to be at odds with their emotional sense of self.

In some cases the respondents' friends beat them to the punch and asked them directly. In other cases, their friends tried to prepare the way for them to come out.

*Frank: This was before I'd come out to them. So he knew I was gay. But I didn't know he knew. (laughs)*

AR: And he never said?

*Frank: No, he never said.*

AR So he waited until you actually said it.

*Frank: Yeah. Actually actively encouraged me to come out to him, so I discover. He's actually. I think he's three years younger than me, but I mean we've known each other for years and years and years, cause he'd moved in not long after we'd moved into the house.*

*So em, yeah he. I mean I'd been, as I say I'd been dropping many more hints about these files, and one day we sat down. I dunno we just sat down at this kitchen eating as much food as we could possibly get out the fridge and just started chatting about this that and the other thing and eventually sort of moved on to that. I was like, oh no. I can't really tell you what they are. Not very socially acceptable, blah blah blah. Eh, I couldn't tell you. You'd be very upset. ... parents finding it. He was like, what is it? What is it? And I was like, oh I can't really say. And eventually three or four hours down the line I was like. Well I'm gay. And he was oh, that's nice. (laughs)*

These stories about telling, of support, rejection, preparation and telling another gay or lesbian person did not just happen once. The respondents had multiple versions of these types of stories. What is common is the fear and emotional pressure that the respondents felt they had to endure.

## **8.6 Hostility and Bullying**

However, not all respondents when faced with confrontations about sexuality were as in control as the previous respondent. Many faced direct hostile questioning about their sexuality.

*Yeah and in, when was that? I think it was 3rd year I got outed and I just denied it completely because I wasn't sure at that point. And it's because this girl didn't particularly like me and she got me into a corner and kicked hell out of me basically. And for like weeks afterwards I had like a bald patch on my head, 'cause I couldn't fight back*

*because I was in the corner and she was like pulling my hair out. And I was like, 'Is that meant to be sore.' 'Cause if you pull my hair I don't feel it at all. 'Cause I've got a hard head you see. And, so I got outed and I denied it. Barbara*

There were numerous incidents of bullying and adverse reactions from those not within their social scene. Both the female and male respondents experienced this type of behaviour and although the majority of incidents occurred at school, the bullying also continued outside school. Not all of the bullying was directed towards the respondents, but also involved their family, especially those with younger siblings. Many of the respondents worried about this.

*More nails got thrown, most of them hit me. Three or four hit my friends. Eventually one hit my guidance teacher and he went, 'Waaaw stop mucking about you lot.' At this point I had a cut there and a cut there and I had a cut on my neck that I didn't know about. Um, and I was just like totally welling up. I was determined that I wasn't gonna cry, cause I knew if they see that it gets to me they'll just keep doing it. So I just sat stoically in silence and my friends were like, 'Bit of a .... yeah. I'm gonna kill them.' I went, 'Just leave it.' Um, and that was pretty horrendous because it just gave me no faith in the school whatsoever. That night I phoned Stone..... line and there's an answering machine saying, phone back on Tuesday between 7 and 9. Bill*

The accounts of physical violence towards the respondents were graphic and alarming. There was a general lack of support and a reluctance to fight back by the respondents, as

they feared it would get worse. The emotional distress was acute, friends were the only source of support, and that was only if they had told someone. When they had not denial was the only option.

### 8.7 Controlling the Information

The respondents had no control over what happened to the information once they had told a few friends.

*And that's how it got out. One of my best friends just turned round and because she was bored one day decided to tell everyone. Conferred about this. She lied, said she didn't. Everyone said she did. Then she went, 'What ...' And we weren't friends any more. Um, it was terrible for about two months. My mum was awful, 'cause we got phone calls. Got phone calls and my mum went ballistic. Bill*

This happened to several of the respondents and in their eyes was a betrayal of trust. They had typically enjoyed a period of time when a few friends knew, they could relax and then they were faced with hostility.

Others chose a different strategy: they went for broke and told everyone.

*But like after that I've told [...] <sup>13</sup>, I ended up telling like quite a lot of my pals. And at this point, like I didn't really think I could avoid telling. I didn't tell any of the laddies. And like I haven't told any at school yet. And I probably won't. 'Cause like a lot of them. I*

*don't know but it's like a lot of laddies are quite immature and a lot of them couldn't. They wouldn't. Like their brain just wouldn't go round it. It would just like go totally over their heads and they wouldn't understand it and they'd just be like grrrrm and stuff. And they'd be like oh you don't. Like they'd either be oh you don't. You're just saying that for attention or something. Or they'd be like oh get away from me sort of thing. So like I've not told any of the laddies. I still muck about with some of the laddies but like I spend much more time with the pals I've got who are like female and stuff because everyone I've told at school so far is female. And like, there's like. I've got like so many more pals now.*

Colin

*So that, cause you know, said to[...], you know of course I would say to [...] and [...] as well. Em, and then you know whenever it was just like, if we were talking and there was someone else there you know it was like of course you would just say to them as well. And so you know eventually it grew and grew and grew. Em, then you know over the October break apparently there was a party and someone I knew got really, really drunk and told everyone. And so basically the year found out and it was like you know, and I didn't particularly care. Mark*

The words 'I didn't really care who knew or who knows' were said at various points by the respondents. This occurred after the initial telling when subsequent telling became less significant. The data on the differences it made that friends' knew ones sexuality are important for understanding the benefits of telling.

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<sup>13</sup> [...] denotes name removed to protect anonymity

*Yeah, it changed, totally. Em, well (sighs) it got in the way of every single conversation, well of some conversations, I would say mostly with [...] and [...]. Remember there was one incident when they were talking about something em, pouring over something in like, I don't know, B Magazine or something. And I said, oh, what's this, what's this? And [...] goes, oh it's girl's stuff. You wouldn't understand. That's quite hurtful. But at the same time, I mean they weren't. She didn't mean it. That was just what they believed, you know, so. Eh, what else? It did, there was quite an obsession with it in our group at one point, it was, and it was the topic of conversation for a while. And then everyone got really bored with it. (laughs) No, but it happens doesn't it, you know? So. Elizabeth*

The respondents ended up in situations where they were educating their peers. For many of them at this point they had yet to meet another gay or lesbian person or enter into a relationship. They were using themselves as examples of what being gay or lesbian was. It was through their interactions with their straight peers that an identity emerged. They could compare and contrast what they felt and thought. This is a different process to coming in to a gay or lesbian environment and seeing whether one matches up to what being gay or lesbian is.

## **8.8 Coming Out: Meeting Other Gay People**

For some of the respondents telling was about coming in to a gay subculture. The following two accounts were types of situations that were only recounted by the male respondents.

*I have to get out of this. I am in MENSA and there were special interest groups and one of them was for gay people. So I joined that I was part of it. If you want you can put a little bit saying your name, where you're from, what interests ... Em, and then there was someone wrote to me. Their name was [...] saying you know, telling like who they were blah blah blah. Saying they always come up to Edinburgh to the Festival and they wondered if I wanted to go round Edinburgh with them and I was saying. Because I mean they knew from what I'd written that I have no idea about anything. So I was, you know I just assumed [...] was a woman's name. Em, I just thought that's so nice. So I wrote back saying yeah yeah that would be really good. Thanks so much. That would be really helpful. Anyway a couple of other letters went back and forth and I was gonna phone to say what I was actually going to be wearing. Like we're meeting at the train station. And when I phoned I got the answering machine and it was a man's voice. I remember just slamming the phone down because I was in my parents' bedroom and just going, Shit. Because I suddenly realised. You know I had just been so clueless. I just had no idea. Anyway I'd already arranged it so I went along. Got a little tour round Edinburgh. But anyway got a copy of I think it was Scotsgay. Anyway so I kept that. I'm sure I still have it somewhere. There was like a group called Forth Friends. So I phoned up their thing on the date and arranged to meet someone. So I went along to that. at the time that I hadn't really ever been to bars. As I was still 17. Em, and so anyway went to this bar. It's kind of sort of bar-cafe and everyone just completely seemed not happy. No one was happy. They all seemed kind of em, very acceptive of the situation they were in. And it just, it was just like, no this is my life just now. I don't want this. Mark*

*Frank: There's me 16 years old plodding down in my school uniform to the train station, to meet this unbelievably repulsive dodgy old man, who yacked on incredibly liberal. Which I thought was great cause I of course, [...], very conservative little town. And he sort of chatted away to me. I sort of smile and nod very enthusiastically. Asked me to have sex with him. No thanks. You're not really my type. Oh you know if you fancy. I was like, yeah thanks.... And then proceeded to stick an advert in his magazine. 18-year-old going to university in a year's time. Looking to go and meet other people in [...]. And somebody replied to that, and I met with him and ended up going out with him for two years, so.*

AR: And that was ... in [...]

*Frank: Yeah, I actually ended up living with him.*

These stories highlight a particular type of experience, whereby the respondents, are isolated, have told no one about their sexuality and decide to make contact with other gay men through anonymous channels, such as the Internet and press. By their very nature, these channels are unsupervised and open to exploitative relations. These types of contact remain present because of the lack of other routes into the gay and lesbian scene. It is of note that the two cases involved male respondents who lived outwith Edinburgh and were unable to access any young people's groups.

One of the female respondents was able to access Stonewall youth group and did so before any of her peers at school knew she was lesbian.

*Oh you've no told anyone. You're ashamed of what you are blah blah blah.' And I was*



*like, 'Well it was my choice. You know I'm only like.' I must have been 15 at the time. I was like. 'Just leave me alone.' But it must have started niggling at me because I thought. I know I should really tell somebody. It would be good to have laughs. Anne*

The pressure to tell came from her gay and lesbian peer group, but there was also internal realisation that school would be very lonely, if no one could share in her life.

These three stories are about a planned entrance into the gay and lesbian scene and show that coming in is not an end in itself. The respondents in solving the isolation are then faced with the pressures of this new environment and have to assess possible courses of action. This can be problematic, as they have no prior experience of this gay environment and aside from previous perceptions gleaned from the press and television their only other perception of what it means to be gay or lesbian is the product of their imagination. Thus, as in the first story where the respondent views everyone as unhappy, he then incorporates that image into what being gay is about and did not want that lifestyle. It is not until later when the respondents have access to other gay and lesbian environments and have integrated their friends into their lifestyle that they are able to make choices about what they want to do. Those that accessed the gay and lesbian scene prior to telling friends, all went through the process of telling friends.

### **8.9 Telling Parents**

Exploring the data on the respondents' relationships with parents is problematical. The stories that are presented are, by the very nature of the research method, one-sided. This

makes it impossible to create a fuller analysis of what transpires between parents and offspring. It would have been unrealistic in the light of some of the parental reactions and their lack of knowledge regarding their child's sexuality to have included them in the research. Nevertheless, whether some of the parents would have been supportive, if they had known, remains academic as the perception of their children dictated what was likely to transpire. In the stories where parents gave unfavourable reactions, the primary concern of this research is what transpired for the respondents.

As previously stated, not all the respondents came from a family unit comprising of a birth father and mother. The majority were either in one-parent families, the mother being the parent, or families with step fathers. There was, however, no appreciable difference in the reaction of parents or stepparents to the news that a son or daughter was gay or lesbian. However, the respondents' perceptions of what the outcome would be were directly related to the degree of closeness that they felt towards the parent. This is similar to talking to friends, but there are several differences. There were no feelings of extreme emotional tension of having to tell parents.

*Well. I think it was 'cause. I don't really know why I didn't tell my parents at first. I told them very soon afterwards, but I didn't tell my parents I think because they were my parents and I'd seen in programmes parents going, 'Oh our son's terrible.' But I'd also seen parents going, 'Oh we accepted it.' So I just didn't know how they would go. And I didn't know how to sound them out. I didn't know whether to be as obvious as to leave something about a gay*

*book around or watch the telly and go, 'Oh they're gay. Is that a bad thing?' I didn't know what to do. Um I thought my dad might be ok, apart from he and my brother had a big conversation about all the different words to use to describe gay people. I was just sitting there getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Which is the only evidence I ever had that my dad could be bad. But it stuck in my head. 'Cause that's where I learned all those words, like rear gunner and things. My dad, he's great. And he's also like a typical man. Went to the pub, went to the races, gambled, drank. Did stuff like that. So I didn't think I'd go to him.*

Alan

*And mother. Can't remember why I didn't go to my mother sooner. I think it was just that we didn't. Me and my parents aren't actually friends. They are my parents and that's it. And I didn't feel I could tell her. I didn't really want to tell her, 'cause I wanted to be me and throughout my whole life people have always said, 'Why aren't you more like your brother?' Obviously he's at Oxford. He plays football and basketball. He's a lot more athletic than I am. So I've always had that. And I've always felt my parents have thought that. I'm sure they don't, but I've always sort of felt they had. And I wanted to be myself. I didn't want to tell my mum I was gay in case she squished it and said, 'No. Be like your brother.' 'Cause when I said I wanted to do drama she tried to go no. Do chemistry like your brother. Which I sort of put my foot down and didn't. I said I would and signed for drama. Got into lots of trouble for that one. Bill*

Parents are not friends and that has an impact on the telling. Parents have different expectations of how you should be and these expectations, as the respondent above relates,

are well known to the respondents. Parents also have a different level of power or control in the minds of the respondents, a power to stop oneself from being.

*I didn't want to tell my mum I was gay in case she squished it. Bill*

Friends, as previously said, may ostracise you or even beat you up, but there is little or no perception of them *squishing you*.

There were, however, other factors that they had to take into consideration, which were not present in the telling to friends. However, the initial process of sounding out the parent was the same as that of friends.

One respondent asked his parents what was homosexuality?

*My dad was like, 'Well it's men who like to have relationships like me and your mum do with each other.' I was like, 'Why do they have to wait until 21?' He went, 'That's a side, well and he thought some people think that it's best for them to wait until they're older.' I said, 'Why?' 'Well, they think if they start too young they might be a bit confused about what they are and not actually be gay.' So why isn't it for the same for straight people?' That isn't my exact words. It was normal people. Obviously when you're 12 you just don't care. And he said, 'Well em, when normal people know that they're straight.' 'How come gay people don't know that they're straight?' And he was like, 'I don't know.' So he gave me some answers. So then I started looking out for the word gay on television programmes, and I'd read the late night*

*things to see if there was anything for being gay on it. Bill*

One recounted seeing a female-to-female kiss on the television prior to the interview.

*Em, well if you're not very strange but you know sort of looking at them and trying to imagine would I like that kiss. And my mum comes in and I'm sort of looking at it and I nearly said to her, I think I might be. This is before I met you and I nearly said it. I got such a fright that I nearly said it because I knew she'd some, say something like, oh no it's ok, you might not be. You know she'd be like that rather than say, oh that's ok. I'll accept you for that. But I didn't because I wasn't sure. I didn't say anything at that point. Em, so I had, idea what? It wasn't something talked about. There was a lesbian couple in my stair who had a cat and like it was pretty obvious they were lesbian, but we never sort of said, oh they're lesbians or anything like that. You know it wasn't sort of talked of really. Em, not because it was sort of a bad thing, it just never. Mum would say things like I'm glad you're normal and things like that. (laughs) And there was a lesbian at her work and stuff who seemed to have a hard time of it.. Cathy*

From the above accounts the respondents based their decision on whether to tell the parent or not on past experiences of parents' reactions to any differences they had enacted, plus specific knowledge of the parents' views on sexuality.

What motivated the respondents to tell is also different from what motivates them to tell friends. Some respondents didn't tell everything, but gave hints. They continued to tell their

parents about their life, but missed out crucial information and in many cases if they were involved in a relationship; they either lied about the sex of their partner or allowed assumptions to be made.

*Well I said to her. I said to my mum I'm going to a youth group and stuff. It's up at Tollcross. I didn't say it was like; it's gay and lesbian people or anything. I just said oh it's a youth group and stuff and it's really cool and stuff. Got a computer and really good, helpful, caring social, youth workers and stuff. And she's says, that's cool. And she goes; oh I wish I had stuff like that when I was your age and stuff. It's, yeah ok. (laughs) And em, I don't know if I told her, but she knew it was like a Stonewall one. I know if someone had said that word to me before even though before I'd been here I would know, like the connotations with Stonewall. You being gay and stuff. So I would know that. So I don't know if my mum knows, but if she had half a brain and she realised the word and she knew it was like Stonewall youth group and then, she would realise what it was. So I'm not sure if she knows about it and stuff. But she's alright with me going and that. So it's cool. Colin*

What is important to this respondent is that his mother knows where he is and his hope is that eventually she guesses.

Other respondents deliberately lied and then were faced with the choice of continuing to lie or tell the truth. This usually occurred when they were having a relationship.

*Em, well I had eventually told her I had a girlfriend called [...]. And I spent a lot of time*

*away from home and she was like. Oh I want to meet this person. I want to know who it is that you're seeing. So I em, eventually figured I had no choice, that I was going to have to tell her. So I phoned up my big sister from Edinburgh. I said, Look [...] you've got to come through. There's something I've got to talk to you about. She's like, What is it? I was like. I can't tell you on the phone. Come through. So she drives all the way through from Edinburgh. We sit down. you know this girl I'm seeing? She went yes. I was like. Well, she's not a she. She's a he. She went. Oh is that all. (laughs) I thought you'd got somebody pregnant. So she went off and told my mother for me. And my mother didn't speak to me for 24 hours and then proceeded to ask me to move out. So this would have been about two or three weeks before the start of university. So I move out, moved out with my now ex. Frank*

The decision to tell in this case was made because the parent was demanding more information about the relationship. There are other considerations.

*Doris: Mmm. I'm just really guilty, cause it's really nasty what I'm doing. I don't really mind about being nasty to my parents, but it's a really nasty thing to do to my girlfriend.*

AR: Do her parents know?

*Doris: Yeah, her mum's gay so.*

AR: Her mum is gay?

*Doris: Yeah it helps a lot. And her dad. I know they're obviously divorced, but her dad's very sort of liberal and PC.*



AR: So you have one side of the family relations that know, and the other side that don't.

*Doris: Yeah.*

AR: Right. So who have you told?

*Doris: Well my brother and he's fine. He thinks it's cool. He found out anyway, I think before I told him. I know. I don't really see any of the rest of my family cause they all live in [...] and stuff. Em*

AR: So why have you not told them?

*Doris: Because it wouldn't be worth it.*

AR: You think they would hassle?

*Doris: At the moment if I told my mum and dad they would say it was a phase, which technically it could be. I don't know. I mean I don't know. I'm only 18.*

In the above story, the respondent feels guilt that when she takes her girlfriend home they have to pretend that they don't have a relationship. The respondent weighs up whether telling would cause more personal distress than not telling and decides not to. The pressure to tell parents come from internal guilt or from parents but unlike, with friends, peers did not pressure the respondents to tell their parents, but went along with the respondents' judgement of their parent and would even collude with the respondents to protect them from their parents. In the following example, the respondent recounts how, after he told his mother, she banned him from seeing his gay friends.



*At once I said to my friends, look because I was extremely brow-beaten by my mother at this point. I said to my friends. 'Look I can't see you any more.' And they said, 'Why?' And I said, 'Well my mum doesn't want me to.' they said, 'Why?' And I gave you know the normal stupid reasons. 'Oh she thinks you're a bad influence. You drink too much. Oh I don't know.' And eventually just beat it out of me. The two of them actually did beat it out of me in a sort of friendly way, a sort of tickle way. And then when they all found out they all went. 'We don't care. Your mum's a psycho.' And I was like, 'Really.' And they went, 'Yeah we don't mind, but fair enough we won't phone. Just phone us when you can and we'll go out when we can.' So I went through a stage of lying constantly to my mother in which I had to phone people and say, 'Look can I say I'm going out with you? Don't phone for a couple of hours.' And they'd always say yeah. And I'd go off and see my real friends. Um, and it sort of gave me great disrespect for my mother because I always thought she was horrendous. And every now and again she'd find out I was lying to her and seeing my old friends and have a big strop. We'd have a huge big fight which resulted in her shouting at me, telling me I was terrible, calling me a lot of names. Um and then I would be sent to my room for a few days, and not let out. If anyone phoned I wasn't there, but I was busy. I wasn't let out of the house. Wasn't allowed to do anything. Bill*

Negative reactions from the parents after they were told ranged from the above of being not allowed out, to being kicked out of the family home. There were also tensions between parents and differences in reactions. The following two stories illustrate these problems.

The following excerpt is one respondent's account of his mother's reaction to his sexuality,

which involved throwing him out of the house.

*Frank: Oh very right wing from what I can (laughs) what I could get. It's one of the few times I've ever heard such total ignorant bigotry. It was really unbelievably ignorant. I was quite surprised. My mother's not a stupid person. She quite intelligent, but blatantly very very agin. So she did all, every cliché you could think of she came out with, which was nice. So em, so I moved in with Ian, which was brilliant because by this time I was now getting money from my dad as well. I had a job; I was getting money from my dad.*

AR: Right, did your dad know about? I mean what was he saying about all this?

*Frank: He didn't know, no. Well my mother and father were split up so he didn't know. In fact I didn't tell him until two years later. And my mother had always said to me. That after that chat she told me that, Oh if your father finds out he'll disown you da di da di da. My father and I hadn't had much of a relationship the five years prior to this. Because of the divorce had become very sad with each other. So she kept me away from him as much as possible. So after I started going to university I got back in touch with my dad properly and we started, sort of started a new relationship again. So at that point I didn't want to tell him, because I didn't want to destroy anything that we had going. Also he was funding me (laughs).*

AR: Right and taking what your mother's reaction would be, if your father's had been the same.

*Frank: Well yeah, I would have then not had any money and I couldn't have paid my rent*

*and what have you. So I was kind of concerned about this. So em, I didn't tell him for ages. When I finally did, it was a strangely big anticlimax. I basically sat him down. Oh do you remember Ian. It was like yes. Remember how I used to, used to be my flat mate, bearing in mind this was a single bedroom flat. Em I used to say yeah, I slept on the mattress on the floor ... I was like yeah, well we were going out. And he was like, yeah. So that was a. And also he's an airline pilot and his wife is an air hostess. So both of them will a) have known an awful lot of gay men and b) I have been living with a guy in a single bedroom flat for a year. Em, so he wasn't at all surprised. And also quite cool about it. He never said anything ... I mean we're not particularly close anyway so there's no change from what was happening between the two of us.*

*Nope, 'cause I said to my mum, 'Can I tell dad? Is this something he'd be groovy with?' And she said, 'No. He'd beat you. He'd kick you out. I don't want that to happen. Don't tell anyone, ever.' Um, this made me a bit more sort of, 'Oh what the hell's going on?' Bill*

Threats of violence and also economic factors influenced the respondents' decision to tell their parent. For some respondents the fear of being homeless or not being economically supported created tension. Sometimes the parental reaction was positive, but still viewed with suspicion by the respondent.

*Ah, so I doan know, it just seemed my parents didn't really know any apart from my mum's colleague at work but em, who she suggested inviting round for tea after I came out. No, we're not having this. Like sort of a therapy session over dinner, no. (laughs) Em I don't*

*know. I didn't really have a very good idea of them at all which is also perhaps why I was slow in coming out to the idea, because I didn't actually know. Diane*

And sometimes as with friends the parent knew.

*Anne: That was interesting. They were doing a big family fight about something; no doubt it was my mother threatening to walk out or something. She does that... (laughs) And I remember we had gone to get something from the DIY store and I was in the car with him. And I have no idea how this came up in conversation, but I remember (sighs) I remember it ended up with me crying for some reason and eventually telling him. And he said, I remember him saying to me, yeah, but I knew that anyway. Well, I'm sure he did, he's lived with me, you know, or at least suspected, or thought that I might be you know, having these thoughts or whatever.*

AR: How would he suspect? How would he have known?

*Anne: Well if you never...*

AR: I mean, what do you think you were doing that would have given people, your dad, stepdad — an idea?

*Anne: (sighs) I suppose the really obvious ones are like lack, complete lack of interest in men. Em, maybe there was something in my tone of voice when I was talking about you know particular girls. Em, because at that point I was developing quite a crush on somebody. Em, like I say if the issue was raised maybe I was getting a little bit too pro-gay or something. I don't know if there ever is one thing that pinpoints it, but.*

The data from the initial responses of parents to the respondents' sexuality is not optimistic. Nevertheless, later data shows in some cases an emerging new type of relationship developing with some of the parents rather similar to that with their friends. Within the new relationships parents inquire about respective partners and offer support; this however remains the exception rather than the rule. I used the quote from Philip Larkin's poem *This be the verse* at the beginning of chapter eight. The poem further diverts the blame from parents to grandparents and so on and his solution is there should be no children. The human race will always have problems to solve and as the author of this work I am aware that I am of the same generation as these parents. The respondents have recounted all the problems I thought had been alleviated as problems and have encountered new problems.

#### **8.10 School Authority: Telling**

A large percentage of the respondents' time was spent in the school environment. Whilst at school they are exposed to not only their own peer groups but also the wider school community. This community consists of adults as figures of authority. The data concerning their experiences at school when encountering these authority figures demonstrated a lack of support and appreciation of their needs.

*Um the fact that if I didn't tell someone I'd explode. So that I had to speak to someone and I couldn't go to guidance. My guidance teacher was this horrible woman, who I didn't know her name. She's sort of pointed out; oh that's your guidance teacher. And she was like an insanely busy woman, looked exceedingly busy. Always running round with a*



*paper in her hands. She didn't really seem like someone to me that I could go to and say, 'Look I think I'm gay. What do I do?' So, and my other guidance teachers. I didn't know the other guidance teachers, because we have a system in [...] of houses. And you go out to the guidance teachers in your house. And there's only three in the house, two or three. Didn't know the other two at all. And the other three guidance houses I didn't know at all, and I couldn't go to anyway. Um, and there was no teachers that I really got on that well with, that I could go up and have confidence in not to tell people. I didn't know what would happen. I didn't know, if I told them, because I was under 16, they would phone my parents. If I told them they would write a report, tell the other teachers, tell the head master, tell the kids. I didn't know what was gonna happen with that.'* Bill

What this story tells us is that the message from school is ambiguous. Schools are not to be trusted. They are places that transmit the dominant values rather than places that protect individuals. This transmission of dominant values becomes more apparent when the respondents recounted their experiences of sex education. As previously written, the majority at this point was aware of their sexuality and some were *out* to their friends.

*And I just went, 'Hullo. What happened there?' And of course at the end she said, 'Does anyone want to ask me questions?' And you're not going to stick your hand up in the middle of your classroom and say, 'What was that about people going off with the same sex?' You're not going to do that. So you just sit there and go, 'I don't don't know, I don't know. No that's fine.' And then you'll just file out and worry for ages at home. Um, so basically although I was told on the video for a second that it was ok, didn't know what to*

*do, didn't know what it was about. Didn't really know anything. So I just thought if I told somebody we could talk about it. Ernie*

*You can imagine so, at the bit where the woman said, 'Right we're going to talk about homosexuality.' I couldn't do what I wanted to do and say, 'Help.' I had to sit there and wish my friends would say the right things. And they tried. But of course they didn't know what I wanted to ask. They couldn't. But they asked really groovy things. They said, 'What are STDs? How can you get them? How does that work?' And the woman was like, 'Oh my god. How do they know so much?' But, she had all the information. And she went; 'Look,' after about 10 minutes of this she went. 'Look, this is the number of the Stonewall youth project. Phone it' and told us it about three times, which is like burned into my brain. And that was fine.' Bill*

These stories highlight several problems for the young gay and lesbian at school. It is impossible for them to access information pertinent to their needs, unless they come out to all their peers. In the light of previous data regarding negative experiences and bullying, this is not the preferred option of the majority. Those respondents who had friends who could advocate on their behalf were relying on the very people they themselves had educated to attempt to ascertain more information. This is not satisfactory for several reasons primarily that the questions asked were not from the perspective of the young gay or lesbian.

*I mean if Clause 28 had of been in place when I was at school you know I could have found out some information, talked to people. I wouldn't have felt so. You feel very*

*isolated when you're at school because there's no one to talk to about it. So, and it also makes for a, I think a more liberal society when we can actually redress issues that not everyone faces. I mean open up people's minds, and that applies to everything, all cultures, nationalities. I don't think it makes a more tolerant society. It makes for a I think that, I dunno, a brighter society if there's more diversity you know.* Eric

As this respondent recounts, if education at school had been more inclusive then maybe society would be a better place; a sentiment that I wholly concur with.

### **8.11 Conclusion**

The themes that arise from this chapter are the different stages involved in public admission of sexuality. The telling to different audiences, parents, peers and other gays and lesbians involves different strategies. Telling is not a one-off occurrence and is guided by social and psychological factors such as access, fear, social network, economics and emotional distress.

This chapter focused on the dynamics of telling sexual stories and the effects on subsequent relationships. Plummer's (1995) account of telling sexual stories argues that it is through the stories that voice is given to those who are generally considered 'other'. The stories that are created reflect the changing social landscape for young gays and lesbians. The previous literature by Furlong & Cartmel (1997) suggested that young people are presented with more complex choices and the net result is that:

Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold



themselves responsible for their inevitable failure (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; 114).

The solutions that young people arrive at in the face of undue pressure may not always be healthy. The bullying, the lack of school support, the ejection from the parental home, all culminate in emotional, mental distress that can lead to what one respondent describes.

*Barbara: Well ah cut ma hands a couple of times, but I've no done anything serious like taken pills or jumping out a window.*

AR: So when did you cut your hands?

*Barbara: I started doing it when I was about 15. And am still doing it now but. It's just like when am really, really upset and hings are getting on topi mi. Ah don't want ti lash out at people, so ah lash out at myself instead.*

The external negative pressures get transferred into self-hate and self-mutilation. The initial story of suicide attempt and the above of self-harm highlight a common gender divide. Men commit the ultimate self-harm — that of suicide — and women self-mutilate. This story and the starting story illustrate the very real negative effects of the pressures facing young gays and lesbians.

The literature on telling parents, Savin-Williams (1998), mirrors this research in that parents are not the first to be told. The accounts of hostility within school and in the family home have also been previously discussed within the literature review, and are also evident within

this research.

I often tell my students that different theories are analogous to viewing the world through different spectacles. This chapter presents the opportunity for several theoretical interpretations and mirrors previous research on young gays and lesbians. The issues will be further discussed in the final chapter.

However, there is another pair of spectacles one can use to view this data and that is emotional. The reader is faced when reading this chapter with the problem of viewing the glass as half full or half empty. When I view it as half empty I can highlight the negative experiences faced by the respondents. I could also view the glass as half full and highlight the positive experiences of the respondents: support from peers and parents, their role as ambassadors for the gay community, their sense of humour and resilience in the face of adversity and their courage to be themselves, to take the first steps to establish a coherent sense of self.

The reality for most is a mixture of good and bad experiences, and whether the negative or positive prevails has profound implications for their future happiness. What is evident is that, as Furlong & Cartmel (1997) argue, society is failing in its duty to care.

## Chapter 9

### Love and the Future

Love is a wound within the body  
That has no outward sign  
(Marie de France)

#### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter is about love, sexual relationships, and the future aspirations of the respondents. This chapter takes as its focus the sexual scripts of the respondents and utilises the work of Simon (1996) on sexual scripts and of Wight's (1996) on heterosexual sexual discourses. I was acutely aware, as I listened to the stories of first loves and current loves, of the age difference between the respondents and myself. It is easy to forget with the passing of the years, the intensity of young loves and the time frame in which they operate. Relationships for the respondents lasted as little as a day, to the maximum in this study of two years. Although it was the norm in this study to have a sexual relationship, not all of the respondents had reached this point. This was either due to lack of opportunity, living in rural communities, or no contact with other gay and lesbians as they had not yet met any other homosexuals. Other reasons were to do with trying to figure out who they were.

At this juncture in the data, the issue of gender differences becomes more apparent. The nature of the conversations that took place illustrated the differences. The young lesbians were in general less sexually experienced than the young gay men. However, the major difference was that the young men very patiently explained the intricate details of their

sex and love lives to me during the interview in more depth than the female respondents. Whilst after the interview on numerous occasions the young women asked me questions about my relationship and how did one balance the needs of self against the needs of their partner, the young male respondents after interview did not discuss these issues, but had general conversations. I can only surmise that this was because of the gender and age difference between the respondents and myself, an area previously discussed in the methods chapter. In this chapter I present the male respondents' data first and then the female respondents' experiences of sexual relationships.

The last section will include the views of both sexes regarding the future. It is analogous to asking heterosexual youth the question: do you see yourself as getting married and what will that mean for you in the future? The responses in this section don't neatly divide along gender lines and thus show how sexuality can disrupt the usual gender expectations regarding future relationships and lifestyles. Within this section I will also examine the images they had of a future gay and lesbian life.

I chose the quote at the beginning to reinforce that for many of the respondents the opportunity to discuss with peers the subject of who was it that they *fancied* or had relationships with was lacking. It is perhaps because of this that the male respondents were so forthright in their responses, as they had previously had no opportunity to discuss the issues around sexual and emotional relationships. The female respondents may have

been too reticent to discuss the issues on tape as they also had a lack of opportunity to discuss sexual relations.

This chapter also addresses the issues of the first time the respondents fell in love and the first time they had a sexual relationship. For the male respondents the issue of sexual encounters as opposed to relationships is also examined. Finally, what constitutes a relationship for the male respondents is discussed.

The presentation of the data for the female respondents is also different. The first love and first sexual encounter is explored. Then sexual relationships with men are examined. Finally, what constitutes a relationship for the female respondents. The amount of data from the female respondents is far less than that of the male respondents. When the male respondents were asked questions they talked at length without prompting, unlike the female respondents.

## **9.2 Male Respondents: First Loves, First Time**

The first time someone has sex is not always the first time of falling in love and the respondents' stories illustrate this. Many of the male respondents' first sexual encounters had little to do with love and more to do with sexual experimentation. However, the first example I describe here is the story of first love and first relationship and it demonstrates



several key issues. The lack of opportunity to discuss a relationship is reflected in this account. Colin explained that he becomes aware during the course of this first relationship that it should be kept hidden. However, the initial secrecy was not so much a matter of protection as a part of the dynamic that made the relationship special.

*I don't know. I think it was at first it was just because it was like our thing and we were pals and stuff. And it wasn't that we were hiding it, it was just that it didn't really, wasn't something that we would do in public or anything. People didn't see it or that and didn't find out about it. 'Cause I it was, just ours. We weren't consciously hiding it but it was just something that wasn't out ... people. And then um, after that when we realised what was happening and stuff it was like, we made sure that it wasn't blatantly obvious to people what we were doing and stuff. Colin*

He describes the type of sexual relationship in a different way from later sexual relationships.

*Well it was like mainly just kissing and cuddling and we like used to like sleep together like in the same bed all the time. And um, shared baths and like. There was like feeling each other and stuff and a did a bit of oral sex as well, but not really to any depth, just a bit... It wasn't really heavy stuff at all. Colin*

There is more intimacy and sharing in the above account, rather than it being sex for pure sexual release.

AR: Did you tell anybody at all?

*Colin: No. I don't think so. I think I like, like I sort of mentioned it to a couple of people, but like I didn't say like the physical stuff. I just said like we were really good pals and like I don't think, I'll ever have a pal as good as him. I didn't say like we were boyfriends or anything.*

He was aware that telling they were boyfriends would not be acceptable, yet he wished their friendship to be acknowledged. On the other hand his motivation may have been to explain why they were always together. It is unclear from this account as to why.

This account illustrates the secrecy involved in this young gay man's first love. All of this took place at primary school and was prior to his teenage years. There was awareness even then that this activity would not be approved of and, therefore, had to remain hidden. He was the only male respondent to recount this type of early sexual activity. Later in the interview, he reflected that this experience had meant that his childhood had not involved the usual playing relationships.

*stuff, that I'd sort of missed out on because I was with [...] so much and things. Colin*

He felt he had to form relationships with guys and do the football thing, but it was not as satisfying as his relationship that he had with his young friend. This first love had a profound effect on this young man and no subsequent relationship had been able to match up. The relationship ended when his friend moved to England and they lost contact with one another.

Colin was the only respondent who had a sexual relationship before the age of 13. On first reading it may appear contradictory that Colin felt he missed out on same-gender friendship activities, whilst all the other respondents felt they missed out on sexual relationships. The social taboos censor against same-sex relationships, forcing young people to choose between friends or secret lovers.

Whilst discussing what a relationship was, an oft-repeated view was that somehow the respondents had missed out on relationships whilst younger.

AR: So you think you needed the adoration, the single intimacy on you to make you feel strong?

Ernie: *Yeah I think just all these; I felt I missed out on that growing up as well. So, I wanted that. I want to experience that. You know I was incredibly happy last year when he was over here, so, and eh. I mean I think that's why I wanted it.*



All of the other male respondents' first sexual encounters were with a stranger. In the following account the stranger was older and more experienced. The respondent did not admit to the stranger that it was his first time. There was no discussion between them about this. The respondent thought that the older man must have known. I was interested to know how he felt during this first sexual encounter.

*Um I think more than terror. It was a sort of mixture of fear and exhilaration. Sort of adrenaline kicking in So I was jumping about livid. Not livid, probably the wrong word. Um, what would it be ...? Eh anxious, anxiously dodging about. Trying to walk in a straight line. I probably appeared very drunk, I was so nervous. Um, shaking and. Um.*  
Eric

I was then interested in how he knew what was expected.

*Eric: Um, I'd read an awful lot of stuff, and by that time Queer as Folk<sup>14</sup> had been on. So, there was a lot of information in that (...), very explicit. Em, so I sort of knew basically what I was doing, and just let myself sort of go along with it.*

AR: And that was an enjoyable experience?

*Eric: Mmh.*

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<sup>14</sup> *Queer as folk* a soap about young gay men set in Britain.

What this story tells us is that television was the main source of how to behave sexually. However, it was a programme that not all the respondents had seen and some of the respondents admitted that they did not know what to do or what was expected. Whether the depiction of male sexuality in *Queer as Folk* was empowering for this respondent is a matter of debate. Harding (1998) discusses this very issue as to whether there is a gay identity that can be represented by the media. Unlike their straight peers who have numerous images and examples to choose from, the depiction of male gay sex is not a regular television occurrence. Therefore, I would argue that the possibilities and positioning that the young gay men are able to enact are limited by the popular representations of their sexual lives.

This respondent also had the advantage of knowing an older gay relative with whom he had discussed safer sex. He was in this case in a privileged position. Some respondents had gathered information from the Internet but the majority, as in the first example, had started sexual relationships prior to any formal education on safer sex. The majority had sexual experiences prior to age 16. Unlike the first respondent, they went straight into full sexual activity. There was no lead in, romance or intimacy. For the majority of the male respondents their first sexual experience was far from satisfactory. There were numerous comments about how scary it was and how it wasn't that enjoyable. They were however relieved that they had finally had sex. In all the cases they were never the instigator, but had been 'picked up'. They were not in a position of power nor were they informed enough to negotiate their sexual encounters.

The older, more experienced men they encountered held the position of power. As Connell (1987) succinctly states: 'Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities' (Connell, 1987; 183).

In his analysis, homosexuality is the subordinated masculinity, but in the examples from the data, amongst gay men, there are subordinated versions of masculinity. These exist between the young sexually inexperienced gay men and older, more sexually experienced men.

Some of the first times were 'pick ups' by older men. The next respondent was 15.

*Bill: No he was like. I just met him sort of hanging about and stuff in the street. And it was like. It's only ... sort of did. He kens that I've gone away with him and em.*

AR: Was he older?

*Bill: He was about. Well he said he was 19. But, I know for a fact that he was at least 25. And em that was sort of how it started. And then I was just like sleeping with him for every now and again for a wee while.*

The respondents at this point in time were enacting sexual behaviour and the resounding sense of relief that came from many of the respondents when they had finally had the

sexual experience is not surprising. They had finally, one could say, entered the club of the sexually initiated; their fantasy was now a physical reality.

### 9.3 Sexual Release

The major difference between the female respondents and the male respondents was concerning their use of the separation of sexual and emotional relationships. Not all of the male respondents made this distinction, but several did. None of the female respondents mentioned this. That is not to say that some of the female respondents did not have multiple sexual partners.

This excerpt illustrates the type of conversation I had with the male respondents about sex. It highlights that a relationship can be seen as something lasting 15 minutes to several months. I asked each respondent about relationships. There was a wide variation in the number of sexual partners that each admitted to. Two of the respondents had had a few partners, the rest were like the following respondent.

*I've not like had like proper relationships with other guys since then. But like I slept with like 48 guys or something up to now. But like none of them were like anything like relationship wise or anything. Frank*

This raised the question that if they weren't relationships what were they?

*Were they were just like. Like some of them were 15 minutes or something and others of them were like a couple of hours and some of them I saw for on and of for every few days or something for a couple of weeks or something. And it was just, sort of satisfying more a physical desire rather than an emotional one. Frank*

Other respondents reiterated the difference between sexual release and relationships.

AR: So you see that as a physical release sort of thing?

*Colin: Yeah. I mean like it's not like emotionally satisfying. 'Cause you get the pleasure out of it but it's not really on the same wavelength. But if you think about it like I'd rather have. I'd rather be celibate and have loads of really cool pals than just sleep with all these people. 'Cause you don't really get anything, out of it much. I mean it's good at the time and it's good for a wee while but if you keep seeing someone for instance that you you're not really emotionally connected you sort of lose interest and stuff. And just drift apart from them anyway. It's better just to have pals and stuff and not do it at all. But I would like to have a boyfriend as well. But I did try at one point, but it just. So far, it's not worked out anyway.*

The division of sexual release from emotional security does not negate in these young men's mind the desire for emotional attachment. What is salient about these stories is that apart from the participant in the act, no one knows. They did not discuss this with any of their peers who knew they were gay. Colin did, however, talk to his best female friend



about someone whom he emotionally liked. All of this paints a picture of a rather lonely furtive sexual life of young teenagers. It is a sexual life that exists for the majority of the time with casual strangers, whom he meets in toilets and on the street. This is salient as these young respondents were too young to enter the club scene. Whether their encounters would be different when they entered the club scene is debatable as the next account portrays.

*Alan: Yeah, eh I had him and about 20 one-night stands in the space of a few months. Eh, trying to find a boyfriend but not knowing at all what to do about getting one. So it ended up more, ended up more with people who wanted one night stands.*

AR: You weren't speaking to anybody about this?

*Alan: No I didn't.*

Again a pattern of numerous one night stands. Even when older the opportunity to talk to others was not present. This young man wanted to have a relationship, but that was not what was on offer. Both examples show that even although they wanted an emotional relationship, all they were able to access was casual sex.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> During all of the discussions about sex I asked whether they were having safe sex. The responses from the respondents were variable, from *yes always* to *most of the time*. Although the focus of this study was not the sexual behaviour of young gay men the topic arose. From the evidence of multiple partners and the search for intimacy there appears to be serious health issues. Grossman (2001) writes about the problems of educating young gay men and issues of self-esteem. This topic is one which will be discussed in the final chapter.

This finding is echoed in research by Weeks (1993). There appears to be four discourses about multiple sexual partners within my data. One is that casual sex is all that is on offer. This view of gay men as being only interested in sex is a rather negative one to be held by young people. This then impacts on their own sense of self-esteem and subsequent behaviour in the short term; whether this remains in the long term is not known. The second discourse is the search for love. Eventually if you keep trying you will find the perfect person. From later views on the future the respondents did seem to wish to have a stable partner. The third view is that relationships themselves are too difficult. Casual sex is perceived as easier. This seems to be a response after the respondents have had a relationship. The fourth view is that it is all out of one's control, as it is hormones. All men including themselves are programmed for casual sex. Bill gives the explanation for multiple sexual partners as:

*It is the time when hormones are louping.* Bill.

The explanation that this behaviour was somehow not under their control and was biological was frequently given. This could be said to be another example of normative masculine behaviour whereby men are seen as biologically driven.

These discourses have wider implications, which will be returned to.

#### **9.4 How Does One Meet People?**

The ages of the respondents meant that some were unable to access the club and bar scene because they were too young. There were two courses of action available. Some of

the respondents used the Internet. During the interviews one respondent demonstrated how easy this was.

*Eh over the Net actually, em, which is always the easiest place to go. Pubs are a pain in the bum cause you have to do the whole faffing around. Whereas on line you just go I want xyz and they go ok. Let's make it a picture and see what you're getting, And you then, you just say, right, I'll meet you here and there you go. Quick and easy. Frank*

The advantages are you see what you are getting. It is almost like on-line shopping. This was considered preferable to going to clubs, which involved hanging around. They were able to access the Internet at any time. There were often people on line who were regulars. They were able to have chats in private or open chats that others could join in. One of the advantages was that:

*Because you don't necessarily need to put your own name in you can use any nickname you like. Frank*

You could be anyone. This meant, as was explained to me, that a large number of those using the Internet were married.

I asked about personal safety.



*Oh it's safe as anything. I suppose it's as safe meeting yeah like any stranger. Thing is you have I guess to some, I mean you have some, you have their email address. You'll have a picture of them. I mean if they don't match their picture then you're not going to meet them anyway 'cause you wonder what they look like. So at the very least you have who they are, so that if anything did happen. Frank*

The Internet did seem to be a more controlled way of meeting people than the street or clubs.

*Well like a lot of them were just like off the street and stuff. And like I really don't how I managed it like to be honest. Like if I. If like someone said like show me how to do it I'd be like I don't have a clue how to show you how to do it. But it just happens sort of thing. And then like some other guys like you meet like in the toilets and stuff as well. Sometimes like you're not even meaning to do it. 'Cause like you can like sort of like make it really obvious that like you're really into someone. Colin*

*Sometimes like it just like they come onto you as well and it's just like, oh I'm here anyway, so why not sort of thing? And like quite a lot of the time. A lot of the time they're*

*not like totally amazing, but they're ok. And like if there was somebody you didn't like you obviously, you wouldn't go with them. Bill*

On reflection the Internet certainly appears a safer option than public places. However, I was concerned that individuals could pretend to be interested online and lure the young men into dangerous situations. The respondents felt there was always a risk of gay bashing and it was an accepted part of casual sex. They assured me they were careful.

At these points in the interview I got the impression that they were talking to me as if I was some liberal mother. A sort of don't worry mum we are ok really. None of them had suffered physical violence, but most of them had suffered verbal abuse.

It may be that as a result of the lack of opportunity to develop intimate relationships whilst young that the Internet does provide a safe space to experiment. It also provides an environment where they are partially in control.

Both the male and female respondents also talked about going out with straight friends to clubs. The female respondents only did this if they were in a relationship.

## 9.5 Male Views: What is a Relationship?

The above views of sexual relationships prompted me to inquire as to what the respondents meant by relationship and what rules apply. Monogamy was one rule that was raised by some respondents as distinguishing between a relationship and sex. This was sometimes viewed as emotional monogamy rather than just physical monogamy.

*Ernie: When I'm in a relationship I feel well there's a reason that you, if you feel a reason to go and sleep with someone else, then I feel that it reflects on me, and I think well, why do you feel the need to do this, or? I mean if obviously... you're obviously not thinking about me if you're off doing this. There's something not quite right in the relationship if you have to do this, so we're probably not supposed to be together. That's my attitude. And, I don't know, maybe that partly... fact that. In other ways I've had this idyllic childhood with this stereotypical traditional family, where my dad goes out to work, mum stays at home. Is the housewife and everything*

AR: You've got this very secure, loving relationship and that's what a relationship should be.

*Ernie: Yeah, I think that's what it is.*

The above is a very traditional monogamous representation of a relationship. Not surprisingly it is based on his own experiences of the relationship that he knows the best,

that of his parents. In this case, the respondent comes from a secure, stable family unit consisting of mother and father. This, however, was not the norm. It raises the question of what models young gays and lesbians use to formulate their views on how to conduct a relationship. It is not a question that the data are able to fully answer.

Eric had started off really wanting a relationship.

*I mean that's all I wanted when I got into university. I just wanted a relationship and then eh, had two consecutively and the first one was for three months and then a month later I started the next one with [...]. That lasted 15 months, and then six months into that he went out with [...]. Eric.*

Now his view is entirely different.

*That was so difficult. It's too stressful at the moment to get into another one. I don't, although start dating people, but I'm not really interested in anything, so. Eric*

He was not alone in this view.

*Yeah, not at the moment though. I don't, I'm not in the mood for another relationship. Bill*

Bill and Eric were not alone in perceiving relationships as difficult. They involve emotional energy and cause stress. This is hardly an unusual conclusion to be made in the light of the overwhelming lack of experience by the majority of the respondents with intimate relationships whilst they were growing up.

The following account highlights some of the issues around intimacy and relationships. I was interested in trying to ascertain what was provided by a relationship as opposed to friendship. The following quote seems to suggest that relationships are only necessary if you are feeling incomplete.

*Em, I guess a relationship, I suppose it's the intimacy. You can feel a bit closer to someone. Em, I think it's because you'd also. It's an attention thing. It's all the attention, there's this one person and it's just for you and it's not like. You share all your friends and that's great, but you've got one person who just adores you and that's quite a good feeling. Self-esteem, your ego and well-being.. That's why I was looking forward to it before. At the moment, I don't think I really need that. I don't think I need the reassurance of a relationship or the security, cause I'm a bit more confident than I was, cause I wasn't, very. Frank*

Again, like the previous respondent, there is the acknowledgment that a relationship was the focus of all of his energy. What is interesting is that this respondent directly equates relationships with a feeling of self-esteem.

Bill in his account of relationships returns to intimacy, which appears diametrically opposed to the earlier accounts of sexual release.

AR: So emotionally is it different, yeah, in terms of?

*Bill: Emotionally don't know. You connect on some different level that you don't connect on with your other friends. We are opposites in so many ways but in a certain level we are connected and eh it's always. There are certain things that you just share yourself. I think that link is important.*

There are issues regarding relationships in terms of intimacy versus being merged.

*Well I see [...] an awful lot anyway, and I'm not sure I'd want to see him as much as I would do if I was living with him. Certainly if I was living with him I'd have to have my own room. That's a thing I wouldn't want to merge lives and live like that. Em, I know flatmates are nice to have and it's nice to have a boyfriend, but I'm not sure I'd want to live with him just now. We were flatmates originally and so we have lived together before. In fact, just after he left the flat we were in and we started going out, so we know we can live together. But I'm just not sure what to do. It's not for me. Ernie*



*Sex, yes, but I dunno, not much I don't think. Em, certainly the difference between a very close friend and someone that you're going out with, I don't think there's that big a difference, or there shouldn't be that big a difference. Alan*

Relationships are perceived as difficult to maintain and achieve. Not only is there a feeling that there is a lack of suitable partners, but that other men are not interested.

*Em, I think sort of you know, like personal relationship difficulties. Em, you know it's just, as I say you know, sheer numbers. It's so much more difficult. And then the majority of gay men you meet they're not interested in anything meaningful because you know they're as aware of the numbers as you are and most of them just think, oh well to hell with it you know. Just sleep around. Em, and you know it's, I mean it's depressing. Bill*

There was, for some respondents, a perception that heterosexual relationships were more stable.

*I mean especially I know a lot of straight couples that have been couples for the last like 18 months you know. If a gay couple last a month that's considered you know, that's quite*

*a long time. Em, you know it's like if a gay couple's going out for a year people say it's practically married. Mark*

Some views of relationships are much more open and fluid and are about emotional rather than physical monogamy.

*Oh, well, rationally I would say I would like to have somebody that I was seeing who I trusted on the emotional side of things and he was around for a long time. And sexually he would have no problem at all with me having the odd sexual encounter with somebody else. Em, obviously if it became long term with the somebody else that would mean that I would, I was actually changing my relationship to this other person, in which case the old one would die off. I think you can only be with one person at a time, but I don't see why you can't have sort of sexual, more than one person at a time. Mark*

For some their past lack of relationships impacted on how they saw the future.

*Em, I think I could have a very lustful relationship with somebody else. I don't think, I think if I actually got close to somebody, I mean, throughout all my life so far I've only ever really been close to a few people. So I don't think I could ever be really close to more than one person. Alan*



Through all the discussions regardless of how open the respondents were there was no discourse on romantic love. This was a discourse reserved for the future.

## **9.6 The Female Respondents**

As stated previously there were major differences between the female and male respondents when they discussed sexual relationships. Two of the female respondents were sexually relating to one another. However, most of the conversation they both had with me about relationships happened after the interview was finished. This was the case for some of the other female respondents. It would be unethical to reproduce from my field notes what was said after the interview or to identify the two respondents who were in a sexual partnership with one another. Nevertheless, what was discussed was of importance. I have explored previously the nature of my relationship with the respondents in Chapter Six. The respondents clearly felt that after the interview was finished they could ask me personal questions and this led on to relationships and general advice about relationships. The conversations included topics such as: balancing your own needs with those of your partner, the day to day realities of living with someone, moving in and sharing tasks. These were very practical issues. There was also discussion about having children and how it felt to be in a relationship. It was apparent that I was probably the oldest lesbian they had met and the only one in a long-term relationship. They were using the opportunity to learn more about being a lesbian. Despite the bulk of the conversations taking place outwith the interviews there was within the interviews

some discussion about relationships. Several of the female respondents had yet to have a sexual relationship.

### **9.7 Female Respondents: First Love, First Time**

For many of the respondents the first time was just to see, *what it was like*. These sexual experiments involved kissing and very little else. It was not until the emotional bond was stronger that they entered into full sexual relationships.

Falling in love was a common experience, but it was unrequited and usually kept secret from peers. There were numerous accounts of having crushes on various school friends. There was one respondent, Elizabeth, discussed previously, who had a sexual relation prior to 16, but in most cases sexual relationships came much later than the first experiences of falling in love.

The following is an account of a typical first sexual relationship.

*Barbara; Well I just sort of went, 'Will you go out wi me?' And she went, 'Sure.' I was like, 'Eh, what?' And then we'd been going out for about two months three weeks and so many days and then she said. I phoned her and asked how she was, 'cause she was like having headaches and she's on pills and stuff. And then she says, 'I dinae think we should see each other any mair.' And I went, 'Cool.' And then I was trying ti bi hard yi see. And*

*she went, 'Are you really cool about?' I went, 'Aye, sure.' And so I went, 'See yi tomorrow.' And she went, 'Aye.' But she asked if we could still be friends, so. And I went, 'Aye, sure.' And I went, 'I'll see you tomorrow.' And she went, 'Aye, cool.' And then I fell inti Martin's arms and started crying. I was like, 'She dumped mi.' And he wasnae too happy either.*

AR: So did you?

*Barbara: Ah loved her, yes.*

In this case unlike the male respondents the female respondents did initiate sexual relationships. There is within this account a view expressed that women when dealing with one another should be reasonable and not lay their emotions on one another. The male respondents were more concerned about getting over the first sexual hurdle. On reflection the men's discourse about emotional distress is very different. The female respondents recounted *bursting into tears, being emotional* whilst this was not mentioned by any of the male respondents.

There were several accounts of 'shag tag'; which is when at a discos, women phone each other up, using table-telephones in order to start a sexual relationship. The female respondents picked up other women as much as they were picked up. There was no sense of the initiation into the sexual club as with the male respondents. It was all discussed in a light-hearted manner.

The two discourses were romantic love, which included a profound emotional involvement. The second discourse was *'I was a bit of a slapper'* sleeping around and having fun. The women who had casual sex had a different perception of casual sex than the young gay men. It was seen as liberating, but there was also an embarrassment. This was more apparent when young women were discussing sex with men.

### **9.8 Sexual Relationships With Men**

It was not uncommon that some of the female respondents had engaged in sexual relationships with men. There were two periods in their lives when this occurred.

The first was in early teenage years when they were trying to pass as straight and fit in.

*Yeah. I met a few. I went out with em, a couple of guys as well, and then I went out with one guy's sister, which was a bit bad. Em, it's really evil. (laughs)* Doris

The above respondent was unusual in that within her teenage years she was entering relationships with men and women. She didn't view any of these relationships as serious and her first emotionally serious relationship was with a woman.

The second reason for engaging in sexual relationships with men occurred later. The respondents had decided they were lesbian and had engaged in a sexual relationship with a woman. They however felt that they had to give *men a chance*.

*(sighs) I'm not proud of this, but I thought I'd try blokes. I had thought about this many times, and I still don't know properly why I did it. Changed my mind on a weekly basis. Em, sometimes I think it's because it was like a blokes trial. That was awful. God I mean I spent, this is the stupid thing. I spent four years being so, (sighs) you know, so much the adventurous young lesbian, and then, come to Edinburgh and then what happens? Anyway, least said. Some days I think it was because it was Fresher's you know week, ... month. And it's because it was what everyone else was doing, or it was because I just wanted to try it, or. I dunno, I don't know why. Em, have to say I wasn't very impressed. I slept with three guys, two of whom were just one night stands. I was out, I used to go out clubbing a lot when I first came down here, like you know three nights a week or something. Well it's a lot ... cause I don't ... if everybody else is. Em, this guy was a guy called [...]who, (laughs) I went out with for about, ooh, must have been 12 days maximum (laughs) Em, that it was just one of those, god, you can't call it a relationship. It was just basically sex, right. Em, we saw each other which was every day and then I thought. I was (sighs) It was a bit sad actually because after about day 5 right, I was thinking, how can I get rid of this guy? I mean that is the wrong thing to be thinking. So, so I told him I didn't ever want to see him again which was a bit crap really. (sighs) What does that make me sound like? I dunno. Anyway, that was that. That whole phase lasted about a month and em; I just don't know why I bothered, really. It was a complete waste of time. And you can make of that what you like, (laughs) but you know. Elizabeth*

The respondent was clearly ashamed of her actions but felt it was something she had to do. It had the effect of underlining her preference for women and she anticipated that she would not sleep with a man again. This type of behaviour was unique to the women in the study. This reflects the dominant cultural stereotypes within society of dominant males and passive receptive women. It is interesting that all of the women who recounted stories of sexual relations with men felt uncomfortable with their previous actions. This may be because at that point in time they knew they preferred women and were somehow being not genuine. Equally, they could have been worried I would disapprove.

I was interested to determine whether the female respondents who had sexual relationships with men had a different view of what their sexuality was. In addition, whether there would be any effect on their future choice of partner. The most common response was:

AR: So how would you describe yourself now?

*Doris: Don't know. I used to say bisexual, but I really don't see myself with a guy in the near future at all.*

Nevertheless, not all of the female respondents dismissed the notion of having a sexual relationship with a man, including those who had not previously had a relationship with a man. This is very different from the male respondents, none of whom saw themselves as having a relationship with women in the future.



### 9.9 Female Views: What is a Relationship?

Unlike some of the male respondents when they compared their relationships with heterosexuals, there was a different conclusion:

AR: You think women relate in a different level from women and men?

*Anne: Yeah. Like even when I look at like my straight friends and their relationships even though they've been together for like quite a while, it's like they still are a bit distant in the way that me and [...] aren't kina thing. Do you know what I mean?*

Like some of the male respondents there were fears of dependency.

*Well I think the main problem for me and [...] is you can get a bit too dependent and a bit too close and then that's a bit dangerous as well, for if anything ever goes wrong kina thing. Carol*

Some of the respondents were in long-term relationships.

*Just much more serious. We were going out and people treated us like we were properly going out. And I'd spent ages like, like sort of being a bit of a slapper and then like went out with my ex and like just really was like properly in love rather than like you know, just see what it was like. Elizabeth*

*Doris: Well I've got a girlfriend now and I'm really happy. It's much better. It's more of a proper sort of thing that's going on. It's more of a two-way thing. And, so I can. I don't care.*

AR: Are the pair of you living together just now?

*Doris: Em, no. We've got different flats. We lived together though over the summer em, but, quite a lot. Not technically we're not living together, but pretty much are.*

*I prefer just being out in public and holding hands because then it shows people that I'm not bothered what they think. Barbara*

*And well I was in love at that particular moment in time. But. Am no bothered. Barbara*

These are very different perceptions from those of the male respondents. They are celebrations of love and relationships. Their relationships are seen in a more positive light than their female straight friends. There is a high degree of intimacy and emotional bonding.

## **9.10 The Future**

I asked all the respondents what they envisaged the future to hold for them. There was a remarkable consistency of responses from all the respondents. Both the male and female



respondents had fears that they might not be able to meet someone in the future. It is a very powerful image of the lonely homosexual.

*At this age? Not really apart from the fact you probably. It just seems like it might be a bit lonelier in years to come because like, apart from like Stonewall which I don't go to anymore, if anything was to happen between me and [...] it's like, you just didn't have any friends around. The only option seems to be bars, which just seems a bit sleazy, a bit too horrible like. Anne*

*And trying to find a kind of partner for life, there just seems to be so many limited options, and it's a bit more easier for straight people. And then they still find it harder to find someone that they love blah blah blah. So it just seems a bit more scarier in that kind of sense, like growing old. Alan*

*But em, yeah, like I said, the main fear would just be like it just seems a bit scarier and more chance of being on my own and less chance of finding somebody who you actually like. Em, there's a limited number of people and most of them are most likely not to be anything... and you probably won't even like them at all and they just annoy you. Whereas if you've got like millions of guys to choose from I'm sure you can find one that you like, if you ken what I mean. I mean that seems really strange considering I'm only 17*

*and I've been in a relationship for two and a half years. But these kind of things worry me, you know. Carol*

There was a lot of fear expressed, which is not surprising, as they did not have access to many role models that portray long-term gay relationships. This fear was also compounded by the realisation they may lose friends.

There was an appreciation that their heterosexual friends might drift away as they would be more involved with children. All respondents raised the topic of children and some respondents did not want to have children. Some of the respondents, both male and female, discussed the possibility of having children. There were perceived financial advantages in not having children.

AR: And then in future, do you think there might be differences between you and your straight female friends?

*Cathy: Well they'll probably have kids and get married and fall into the whole family trap thing. And I'll be like extra cash, no children, ha ha. (laughs) Well, I mean I don't really have any soft spot for children, so I'm not gonna say that, it's a bad thing just now it's probably like at the time. Although you can never tell if you're gonna get broody or whatever.*

*I definitely think there is a place in people's lives for kids. I don't particularly want to have kids, but I can see why people have them because there's only so much you can do and then you need to do something else, and having children is a good something else to do. And I don't suppose I'll ever be able to do that. Who knows, maybe? But if I can't I can possibly see that that will leave some hole in my life probably. But I'll have to wait and see. Frank*

*Yeah, I guess there probably will. I mean they'll probably get married and have kids. I certainly think children change your life an awful lot. So in that respect yeah I think it's probably. Bill.*

Only the male respondents perceived that they would be sexually more liberated than their male straight friends.

*I possibly have, I possibly have had access to sex a little bit more. It's a lot easier to get laid, or certainly it seems to be easier. My straight friends seem to have an awful lot more problem getting laid than I do. But apart from that, no I don't think I'd live my life differently at all. Mark*

There was a general wish to settle down by most of the respondents and have a relationship.

*Em, yes it would be nice to have a stable partner. But, in the ideal world it would be a stable partner with eh, other entrants from time to time. Colin.*

There was an acknowledgement of change.

*I don't try and predict the future too much cause I can't. Life is strange (laughs). It's very strange the way things work out. Frank*

*Oh, grumpy old cantankerous sod (laughs). em, I dunno. I've no idea. I mean I can look back three years and I've changed quite a lot then. I mean god knows in 20 years' time, 30 years' time. Ernie.*

The future is an unknown place and there is a lack of certainty. There is no marked out road of marriage, children and home for these respondents.

## 9.11 Last Words

I asked all of the respondents if they wished to add anything. Did they want any messages to be transmitted? At the time there was an anti-homosexual campaign and most of the respondents mentioned it.

*Yeah, and you know all those little billboards and everything else. And it's like well why don't you just throw us in front of one of your buses? I mean it's like, I know the viewpoint they're trying to say, and it's like well yeah, so what exactly do you think you're protecting these children from? How many children do you think are seriously screwing up? I mean I'm sure you probably know the suicide statistics. And it's like, oh yeah we need something else. And you know they say you know it's a choice. It's like who the hell chooses to be miserable? Alan.*

The other area of concern was school.

*Yeah well I have thought about it. I mean I don't want to go into sex education, but I had thought about going back to my school after I'd left and basically I'll do a talk. But I never did. They wouldn't have let me, I know. Ernie*

## 9.12 Conclusion

There appears to be two contradictory discourses occurring within the conversations I had with the respondents. There is the dominant heterosexual discourse, which frames the views of the future. This discourse also impacts on some notions of relationships and is used to compare relationships. There is also, particularly amongst the male respondents, a powerful homosexual discourse, which works in opposition to previously held heterosexual discourses. In addition, there are pronounced gender differences in the respondents' views of relationships. This, however, is not translated into differences about the future. The idea of families of choice and networks does not appear to have entered into the lives of young gays and lesbians. It may be that the lack of public images of gays and lesbians having long-term relationships frames their view of the future as being lonely. Despite the break up of the traditional heterosexual family, the increase in divorce, heterosexuals are still perceived as having family. There are other considerations, such as contact with their own family, which in some cases is problematic. There is also the position of children in their lives, a space that some of the respondents wished to fill. This again is a space where the public images are perceived as problematic.

The views on relationships are influenced by their previous experiences, which were recounted in the previous chapters. Writers such as Holland *et al* (1998) discuss the problems of young women in sexual relationships. Despite this, young heterosexuals have the advantage that this discourse is public and peer mediated. In the case of young gays and lesbians this is problematic. In many cases entrance into sexual behaviour was in secret and outwith their peer group. Whether the gender differences in sexual

behaviour can be explained by research based on heterosexuals is in my opinion debatable at the present time. There are also issues of exploitation, safety and health risks within their sexual relationships, particularly but not exclusively for the young gay men.<sup>16</sup> A further discussion of these issues and an examination of pertinent literature will take place in the final chapter.

Last words by the respondents illustrated concerns that were not surprising; the public perceptions of them and their experiences at school were the major areas. The recent scrapping of clause 28 in Scotland may help. However, I suspect that there is still a long way to go until public perceptions and school experiences are favourable.

The last three data chapters have raised numerous issues, which require further discussion with reference to the literature. The management of self within the social spaces of school, home, friends and relationships is clearly problematic for the respondents. There are contradictory discourses framing their lives, which require choices. There are also issues of power, autonomy and gender differences, which influence the choices. The stories told in these chapters also include the internal story, the respondents' thoughts, and arising from these stories are issues of mental health and emotional distress.

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<sup>16</sup> The Scottish Executive (2003) strategy to enhance sexual health and relationships in Scotland makes some attempt to increase awareness.

The next chapter will pull together some of the pertinent threads and summarise the main themes. This will allow a discussion based on the data and literature.



## Chapter 10

### Multiple Stories

Almost without Noticing

Almost without noticing,  
without thinking, it seems,  
you've arrived where you see far.  
Thirty years back, more, the path vanishes:  
and you're forced to sit down in your own shadow  
to think.  
Memory,  
mother of truth and myth,  
tell how the terrain divided the stream.

Eira Stenberg (b. 1943)

#### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter has as its focus the themes that arose from the data explored through the medium of stories. The literature review demonstrated the multiplicity of positions that researchers and theorists had taken in the discussion of homosexuality. The past search for the 'homosexual' has now been replaced with a plethora of approaches. My major unease with the literature was the preponderance of theorising ungrounded in data and the preoccupation with the essentialist, constructionist debate. The lack of grounded theory is likely to mean that discussion of homosexuality is unreflexive of the everyday realities of individuals' lives. Researchers have a responsibility to produce research which transforms and informs. How gays and lesbians conceptualise themselves is influenced by academic discourse, which then becomes part of everyday discourse, as is evident from the data.

The work by Plummer (1995) advocated the creation of a sociology of stories and it is through the medium of the story that the findings are discussed. The theme of this chapter

is the exploration of the stories told by the respondents in the preceding data chapters. Plummer (1995) raises several questions in his plea for sociology of stories;

What is the nature of the story, the social process of producing and consuming the story, the social role that the stories play and what are the links between stories and the wider world (Plummer, 1995; 24-25).

The discussion on stories starts with the researcher's story and is an analysis of the methodological issues and theoretical problems of marrying symbolic interactionism with psychoanalytic perspective. The chapter then explores the data from each of the individual chapters with reference to the different theoretical positions that were used to analyse the data. The discussion continues using Plummer's framework of a sociology of stories. The themes arising from the data are discussed through the stories told about relationships and self. Some of the questions addressed in this chapter are: who hears the stories, how do the stories reflect the changes that have occurred and what is the function of the stories as told in this research? The chapter includes a discussion on stories and their role in the manufacture of identity. The chapter ends with a discussion on the implications of the research. The discussion explores the place and location of research into young gays and lesbians. The political implications both local and nationally are also discussed. Finally the future direction and the lessons learned are explored.

## **10.2 Reflections on Methodology: The Partnership of Symbolic Interactionism and Psychoanalysis.**

Reflecting about the research process raised several issues which are discussed in this section. I encountered both theoretical difficulties and methodological issues.

Rabow's (1983) review of the interplay of sociology and psychoanalysis provided me with some insight into some of the theoretical problems I had faced. I started from the position that a psychoanalysis approach may provide a complimentary view of what was happening in the respondents' lives. However the operationalisation of that position proved difficult. My initial starting point was to direct my inquiry towards the internal lives of the respondents and separate that from their accounts of their experiences. The data in chapter 7 about the internal worlds of the respondents were examined from a symbolic interactionist perspective and psychoanalytical perspective. When the respondents discussed their initial thoughts on being gay or lesbian there were examples of projective identification and transference (e.g. thinking of oneself as male, eroticising clothes) from a psychoanalytic perspective. Simultaneously there was evidence that the dominant heterosexual social landscape and the images of homosexuality influenced their thoughts on the formation of self identity. What was difficult to ascertain was the effect of past experience on the respondents' internal worlds. It was not until I examined their past and current experiences that the application of psychoanalytical perspective became problematic. This was primarily because I had conducted a research interview and not a psychoanalytical interview. As I was primarily concerned with allowing the respondents

to tell their current story I did not delve deeply enough into their past. The difficulties arose perhaps because one of the aims of symbolic interactionism is to explore the disjunction between the individuals' inner worlds and society whilst psychoanalysis focuses on disjunction within the self. Holloway & Jefferson (2000) argue that a free-association narrative interview style allows the researcher to access the inner worlds of the research subject and my style of interview was very open. Nevertheless the problem still remains that within the psychoanalysis interview the interviewer analyses as the interview proceeds whilst in the research interview the analysis takes place after. In addition the psychoanalysis interviewer receives supervision and analysis of their own defensive positions from an external party. This was not available within the approach I utilised but is maybe worth considering for future research.

Another problem was that I had interviewed the respondents as individuals and was writing the data as being applied to a group. I had organised the data in chapter 8 according to themes of experience rather than types of defence mechanisms or as types of autobiographical accounts. Either of these approaches would have allowed me to utilise both symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis. The group of respondents in this research exist only as a social category. Had I run focus groups with all of the respondents I could have examined their interaction from both perspectives of psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism. The end result becomes not a complete synthesis of psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism but distinct chapters analysed from differing perspectives with chapter 7 being the only synthesis. I concluded that one of the problems was that I was attempting to research social lives rather than a discrete

phenomenon such as bullying. It therefore appeared to be too large a task to attempt within the confines of a PhD. Despite these problems I agree with Zilboorg:

One must study the individual in society in order to understand society as a whole, but in order to understand the dynamics of social life, one should not look for the characteristic of the individuals' socialised reactions but for those outlets which society offers for the return of the repressed (Zilboorg, 1939; 341).

Despite the problems I encountered I would suggest that psychoanalysis does provide a conceptual framework which can add to sociological inquiry. However, the direction and scope of the inquiry requires to be clearly mapped out in advance. The use of a psychoanalytic framework in Chapter 7 gave me the opportunity to direct my attention towards the respondent's emotions and furnished me with a language in which to discuss the emotions.

The organisation of the data into discrete chapters of intra-psychic, social and sexual scripts requires that for the discussion these elements need to be put together in order to discuss the interplay between the intra-psychic, the social and sexual selves. The framework I have used to do this is Plummer's (1995) sociology of stories. This approach enabled me to have a more complete picture of the data.



### 10.3 Stories for Self: Intra-psycho stories

Internal dialogues are the stories the respondents told to explain who they were and how they had reached this conclusion. Plummer reminds us that:

People tell sexual stories to assemble a sense of self and identity. Sexual stories lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrasts in the present, and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future. (Plummer, 1995; 172).

The stories recounted in the research interviews were both for public and private consumption. Stories are the medium by which we present versions of self to others. There are rules governing our story telling to others. Parents are not told the same types of stories as friends. Different audiences constrain the stories they are told. They demand answers to different questions and that doesn't always correspond with the stories the respondents wished to tell about self. There are also safe and hostile environments in which stories are told, as borne out by the research. All of these are public stories but there exists also the private rehearsal story a person tells self. Analysis of these internal stories can be viewed from two competing paradigms.

Two of the paradigms operating within the literature are of relevance to this section. There is a paradigm based in the psychology discipline which views the internal world as

governed by mental mechanisms. The uncovering of the mental mechanisms purport to show why individuals act as they do. How these mental mechanisms are constructed is a matter of debate as shown by the literature review (Freud, 1923). On the other hand there is the approach of understanding human action as how individuals make sense of their environment (Mead, 1934; Simon, 1996). This is explored through an understanding of culture, which allows individuals to 'confer meaning' and thereby 'organise' their social worlds. Individuals would have nothing but chaos without culture. In order to analyse 'social action' Weber suggested causal analysis, whereby the sociologist reaches a deeper understanding of the behaviour they are watching. For in this type of analysis the observer becomes an interpreter of the behaviour. They attempt to empathise with the social actors by reaching an understanding of the actors' motives and intentions. This is an exploration of the subjective meaning an individual attaches to their social action. It is the why of why people act as they do.

Individuals also run enactments of social scripts within their heads, sometimes in the form of dreams. Dreams can be conscious fantasy wishes, in that the individual imagines a more pleasant reality. Dreams also occur during sleep and sometimes are remembered. Whether dreams are places where humans indulge in wishes, or where they practice social actions, they are often ignored when examining social action. Personally, I think this is a mistake as often it is through my dreams I am aware of the tensions in my life and my desires and alter my behaviour accordingly, and in this respect I surmise I cannot be alone. That we live in an externally complex social world which at times requires us to protect ourselves from the stresses and strains inherent in our everyday practices is, to my

mind, self-evident. Whether we create mental defences against anxiety and withdraw or attempt to be part of that which causes the anxiety and join in social organisations are two of the options available to us.

Within this research I asked not why the respondents chose to do something, but what was running through their head at the time. I was trying to uncover the internal scripts the stories told to self, as discussed in section 7.3. One of the findings was that the respondents enacted virtual behaviour within their heads. In the case of a female respondent this was as an imagined male. It was not that she desired to be male but that the behaviour she wished to enact was gendered as male. This virtual performance of identity was influenced by the hetero-normative landscape in which the respondent lived. She transformed this gendered perception into 'feminism'. She reassessed her behaviour and re-gendered her virtual behaviour into an image of a strong woman. It is only possible to reinterpret self from the information available. In this example there is information in everyday use, which the respondent could use.

The respondents in this study discussed the emergence of a 'feeling', as discussed in 7.5. Part of this feeling arose from a perception of being different. This occurred when the respondents observed that they paid attention to different social stimuli. This attention to difference is similar to Benhabib's (1992) notion of the concrete other. The search for the meaning of this feeling within some of the female respondents led to gender confusion. Some of the female respondents ascribe male gender explanations to their actions and feelings. What is interesting is that the some of the female respondents ascribe male



gender explanations in order to virtually enact their future possible behaviours. It appears that initially they are unable to make sense of their feelings unless it is in a male gendered landscape. The naming of this feeling and the acknowledgement of the feeling does not always occur in tandem. For some respondents there is a preoccupation about what being gay/lesbian means by constantly comparing oneself to the surrounding information and imagery. This involves the construction of a sense of self from the available images of the social meaning of being gay and lesbian. This inner dialogue and reflexivity adds another level of story telling.

Most of the respondent's internal stories were about the interplay between how they saw themselves and the external images of homosexuality rather than gender. These stories can be viewed from the perspective of all of the five basic plots, as cited by Plummer (1995). The respondents are on a *journey* to discover self. They are engaged in a *contest* against the dominant views of what they wish to be. They are *enduring suffering*, in silence, isolated from their peers. They are seeking *transcendence* towards a goal of a new self. Finally they are trying to make sense and establish *a home* for themselves within society.

#### **10.4 Social Audiences of Stories**

This section examines the data that is discussed in Chapter 8. Coming out as (previously discussed in the literature) has been seen in stages related to one's psychological readiness to accept a stigmatised identity. This was later reconceptualised to take account of the social structural barriers, such as wealth and access that militated against social

acknowledgement of one's sexuality. These conceptualisations do not take account of the multiplicity of social relationships that young people have to form. The process of coming out is also more complex than the literature suggests.

Young people do not come out of a straight society into a gay social space, nor is coming out a public acknowledgement, a single action denoting a fixed identity. Coming in is a fluid social process whereby the respondents formed multiple identities. These multiple identities existed at various levels of intimacy. This process is motivated by seeking an increase in the level of intimacy within their lives. The final destination is one of a sexual relationship, which may take several forms.

Coming out or the public acknowledgement of sexuality becomes important in how it affects the level of intimacy that the respondents are able to access. This is not the only reason- fear, stigma and unease of self all mitigate against coming out and accessing relationships. This is influenced by structural factors such as availability, like-minded individuals, fear and money, as discussed in section 7.7. These appear at times as insurmountable barriers to the young. On the one hand the impression they glean from society at large is one of a free space, yet their access is severely limited. On an individual level, as they reflect on who they are, there are for them more possibilities of individuality. It is the opening up of these possibilities that lead many young people to question and gain awareness of self. This process occurs when they have less social and economic capital and leaves them stranded in a social setting which does not reflect the fluidity of possibilities. This is particularly pertinent in the school setting.

It is my view that research on young gays and lesbians, which utilises story telling, uncovers the answers not only to why young people choose to tell or not about their sexuality but also the complex issues young people have to weigh up. It is not enough to explore social action, but to uncover the reasons as to why individuals choose certain courses of action.

Some of the gay and lesbian research reviewed in the literature focused on families and school experiences (Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998; Harris, 1997; and Herdt, 1989). This previous research was predominantly from a psychological perspective and not through the medium of story telling. The problematic nature of this psychological research can be demonstrated in the often-contradictory evidence, which appears. For example, the relationship between mental health and disclosure to parents has demonstrated both an inverse relationship with suicide (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993) and a positive relationship with suicide (Rotherham-Borus, Hunter & Rosario, 1994). This type of research moved the focus of inquiry towards a problematisation of young gays and lesbians rather than an acknowledgement of the problems of society.

Weston (1991) has explored the place of the family within the lives of gays and lesbians and has uncovered the social ties that lesbian and gays make to create a family of choice. Interesting as this research is, at this point it does not feature in the lives of the respondents in this study. They are at present concerned with the social network of heterosexual peers and are to varying degrees dependent on the family.

As Savin-Williams writes;

It is difficult to recommend a research agenda when the paucity of research is as significant as it is regarding the relations bisexual, lesbian and gay youth have with their parents (Savin-Williams, 1997; 93).

Savin-William's (1997) review of the research into young gay and lesbian relationships with parents mirrors several of the findings within this research. The fear of financial ostracisation and the desire not to upset the parent are two findings, but in general only a minority of researchers have discussed why young gays and lesbians do not disclose. Within this research, in section 8.9, there were reasons for non-disclosure, which indicated a desire to protect one's own integrity and sense of self. Parents are powerful people who not only exercise economic control, but can also influence social networks. Parents can deny access to friends. The not telling to parents allows the young person the freedom to experiment without interference. It allows a young person the space to be who they want, without having to explain or justify their actions. This is particularly important during periods of their lives when they are trying out all of the possibilities and have yet to reach a conclusion about themselves. Young people may choose not to tell parents because the parental value system differs from that of their peers. They also gain more support from peers than parents. The telling of parents does not initially affect the degree to which they can form intimate relationships with peers; it is of no help with these problems. However, telling parents can disrupt intimate relationships, as evident from the research data, especially when inviting one's partner home. When one weighs up the pros



and cons the risks of disruption are greater than the benefits. It is not until they are independent or perceive the parent to be supportive that telling becomes a sensible option. The consequence of not telling for some individuals is a profound sense of guilt in that they are not being honest. The long-term aspects of this behaviour and future actions that young people may choose to take have not been elucidated by this research. What is important to remember is that parents are not friends and that there exist numerous differences in the relationships with peers and the relationship with parents.

The other important source of authority within young people's lives is the school environment. School is an environment where there is the assumption of heterosexuality. The discourse of heterosexuality is further enforced by legislation.<sup>16</sup> Plummer (1989) writes about the structuring of heterosexuality within schools. The hidden curriculum, which reinforces gender relations, ignores homosexuality and in many cases actively discourages any discussion. The introduction in some schools, to allow students' choice of topics in social education, produced within this study some unexpected results (section 8.10). The young gays and lesbians felt unable to broach the subject and relied on peers to support a discussion on homosexuality. When the majority are given a choice they choose topics of interest to themselves and young gays and lesbians are inevitably never in a position to be a majority. So instead of allowing diversity schools are again reinforcing heterosexuality.

The instances of bullying and misery recounted by the respondents are a theme, which is echoed in the literature, and discussed in section 8.6. I would not advocate the stance

taken in New York<sup>17</sup>, for the setting up of separate gay and lesbian schools as a solution to this problem, as I am of the view that segregation eventually becomes divisive. The history of education in Scotland is a case in point<sup>18</sup>. However, if the education authorities took the same public stance on sexuality as they take on racism the problem would be alleviated. It is lack of coherent policy which places the schools in a difficult position. The position is further hampered by the lack of positive gay and lesbian role models amongst the teaching staff. The staff may now no longer lose their jobs, but it is still not a topic gay and lesbian teachers feel able to broach. I have no optimism for any change within the present system until teachers and pupils can feel safe to express their sexuality. Regardless of all the social change and freedom the school environment is one in which young people spend a large part of their lives and as it remains institutionally homophobic, the bullying and misery will remain.

### **10.5 Intimate Social Audiences**

This section draws together some of the data from chapters 7 and 8 and the focus is on intimate social audiences rather than the wider social network. Friendship is without doubt an important part of most people's lives. It is where we form intimate relationships, where we test out who we are. Friendship is a source of emotional support; it is the place where we are safe. The role of friendship within the lives of the respondents in this study is complex and not without difficulties. Unlike their heterosexual friends the participants

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<sup>16</sup> Section 28 was still in force during part of this study.

<sup>17</sup> The gay and lesbian school has now been given public funding.

<sup>18</sup> Scotland has a history of education separated on religious grounds.

in this study were often put in the position of educating their peers about being gay and lesbian. In some case when they were unsure as to what that meant.

Within this research friendship was discussed prior to acknowledgement of sexuality in section 7.8, and later when disclosure of sexuality was made for the first time, in section 8.5. It is an area that requires further long-term study. From this research there are some apparent differences between young gays and lesbian friendships and those of older gays and lesbians and those of their straight peers.

Whilst reflecting on difference between young people today and 30 years ago I was struck by the absence of difference in friendship stories. The stories of belonging to a small socially outcast group are similar to past stories. In addition the stories of being part of the crowd and hiding within the group are similar. The friendship stories reflect that although society may be changing, the strategies available to form friendships remain the same. This may be that there is not a large enough visible group of gay and lesbians within each school who are able to form their own subset. The respondents were able to identify very few peers who were also gay. What differs especially for the majority within this study is that they had access to other gays and lesbians outwith their immediate peer group. Many of them recounted that this was initially very supportive, but they drifted away back to their original peer group. A common sexual orientation is not, it appears, a firm basis for friendship. The initial formation of friendship with the other gays and lesbians was based on trying to create a safe space and learn about self.

When that task was finished the respondents moved back or created another set of friends where interests were more varied. There were within the study some who had both gay and lesbian friends and straight friends, but the management of that was for some problematic. There was pressure on both sides to reveal what they were doing. Friendship depends on communication and reciprocity. The balancing of these two aspects of friendship with separate peers groups was not successful for all of the respondents. There was in common with other research (Nardi, 1999) the development of sexual partners as friends. The sexual partner in some cases was the friend or sexual partners developed into friends. This may suggest that with young gays and lesbians due to the lack of friends, partners take on the dual role. This may make the development of other friendships problematic as they could be seen as being in competition with the partner.

The respondents usually belonged to small groups of friends and in many cases had just one friend. The lack of large friendship groups may reduce the sense of belonging amongst young gays and lesbians. This sense of belonging is usually found within gay- and lesbian- only groups. In addition many of the respondents shared the perception that in the future they would drift apart from their straight friends, because of marriage and children. They were as yet unable to envisage a social space within this heterosexual institution for themselves, as discussed in 9.10. The solution for some was that in the future they might enter into same sex relationships, which included children. The family type networks, as described by Weston (1991) in her study of Californian gays and lesbians, were not yet evident.



The lack of close friendship networks was initially motivated by fear. As friendship includes a degree of sharing, the respondents were reluctant to reveal self, in case the result was rejection. Interestingly, this was not usually what transpired when they did tell their friends. Nevertheless this anticipation of rejection curtailed their friendships, as discussed in 8.4. The respondents repeatedly told the stories of the improvement of the quality of their relationships when they did reveal their sexuality. However, a new set of problems arose in that they were no longer in control of the information. They were now reliant on others to protect them from any anti gay and lesbian statements. This lack of control, as discussed in section 8.7, meant for some respondents that they were bullied.

Although there were many positive statements regarding the coming out to friends, they were faced with the constant demand to explain themselves. One may surmise that this would not be necessary if the level of knowledge about gays and lesbians in the general public domain was such that they were not viewed as being completely different. Instead the respondents were put in the position of speaking for all gays and lesbians which, when you haven't formed a clear idea of what that is, can be daunting. As some respondents recounted, it is irritating to be a source of conversation. The respondents' friendships with straight peers tend to go through this process, this is unlike straight friendships. It is, however, usual to focus on any difference, e.g. coming from a different country, but the difference of sexuality seems to always set them apart. Their sexual difference is the stage upon which all aspects of the respondents' lives are set. The respondents see this as important when they first meet new people and there are two distinct views. One is they reveal their sexuality and then form friendships, with the view

that if the other doesn't accept them nothing has been lost as they weren't worth knowing. The second strategy is to get to know the other first then reveal their sexuality when they gauge they will not be rejected. The second strategy involves a degree of dishonesty, which may be uncomfortable. Neither strategy is a concern that their straight peers consider when making friends.

Friendships, in particular same-sex friendships, have been viewed as places where individuals can practice gendered behaviours.

There is etiquette in the practices of adolescent seduction that is understood by men and women. This etiquette emerges from the language of instrumental sexuality that dominates the public culture of young people and informs the mechanisms of sexual reputations (Holland *et al*, 1998; 91).

In one sense the young gay or lesbian who is out to their friends has a ready-made sexual reputation. This is a public perception of gay males, in particular, as being highly sexually active. Whilst their peers are involved in the negotiation of sexual reputations, the young gays and lesbians are sent to the sidelines. The male respondents who had female friends became, because they were male, a source of knowledge for their friends about males. The young gay men were able to discuss men as desirable and as partners with their female friends. The gendered behaviour they were learning was not part of the usual male discourse, but a female discourse. The young lesbians in this study were both excluded from the male heterosexual discourse about women and the female heterosexual discourse. Their straight female friends did not view them, nor did they view themselves,

as having the same type of relationship problems. There was in essence no social space where they could discuss the issues involved in relating to another woman. This lack of social space to discuss these issues may partially explain the conversations I had off-tape. Nevertheless it is worrying that the young lesbians feel isolated regarding talking about relationships.

All of these issues make it particularly difficult for the young gays and lesbians to practise the performance of their identity as young gays and lesbians. They are enclosed within social spaces that allow limited access to freedom of expression. They cannot, for example practice dating rituals at school, instead the performance of their identity is at best sporadic and at worse within their imagination. Within their peer groups their identity is structured by their peer's perception of what it is to be non-heterosexual. This re-iterates Erikson's view that identity is affirmed by the social order. The social order may be in a state of flux (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim-2002) but it has not yet broken down the dominant heterosexual structuring of society. The net result of the problematic nature of forming intimate relationships has a knock-on effect on the discourses employed by the young gay men about sexual relationships.

### **10.6 Sexual Stories**

This section discusses the data from chapter 9. Heterosexual discourses on sexual relationships have been documented by Wight (1996), Holland *et al* (1998) and have highlighted the lack of space for heterosexual women to influence the sexual agenda. Wight (1996) also identified types of discourse used amongst male heterosexuals, as

discussed earlier. These were *'uninterested, predatory, permissive, and romantic discourses.'* Within the data I identified several specific discourses about sexual relationships, as discussed in section 9.5. There were differences between the lesbian discourses, which were of two types, discourses about men and discourses about women. I have limited data on the sexual discourses of lesbian women as previously discussed. The range of discourses by the young gay men was more extensive.

The romantic discourses appears to be the only discourse that has transversed both genders and the heterosexual, homosexual boundary with regards to talking about sexual relationships. This discourse is a powerful story within our culture and is found in a variety of genres. It is not surprising that this discourse is in evidence, but it has to be said it is a minority discourse. Within the romantic discourse for the respondents was a view of relationships as following a monogamous traditional heterosexual ideal. The traditional heterosexual ideal comes with a series of rites, marriage and public acknowledgement. Gay and lesbian marriage (relationship contract) is at present a topical subject due to the recent change in legislation. It may be that, as the topic is discussed; young gays and lesbians will become aware of the multiplicity of gay and lesbian relationships.

In tandem with discourses about sexual relationships, there is also discourse about why individuals behave the way they do, within relationships, as outlined in section 9.3 on sexual release. The discourse of 'hormones' or a biological imperative is found within this data, as it has been found in heterosexual discourses. This male hegemonic view sets



up a predatory discourse amongst male-to-male relationships. Perhaps surprisingly this predatory discourse is found amongst female-to-female relationships, within casual sex. This may be a reflection of the changes within society where women are able to access a 'ladette culture'.

In contrast to Wight's (1996) research the young gay men had two other discourses. The permissive discourse in Wight's work differs from the casual permissiveness of the gay men, in that the young gay men feel that is all that they are able to access. Their permissiveness is about fitting in to what is expected. Their perception of gay older men is based on an initial media presentation, which is reinforced by their experience. As they only access clubs and bars they are left with a one-sided view of what it is to be a gay male. An analogous example would be if young heterosexuals' only accessed clubs and read about 'drunken louts in Greece' they might arrive at the same conclusion. The young heterosexuals view may arrive at the same conclusion as the young gay male. The lack of visible gay male couples in long term relationships further adds to this perception. A burgeoning gay and lesbian scene has created a similar stratification to that which happens in heterosexual life, whereas 30 years ago the gay community was a close-knit diverse group, within which I was able to access a wide spectrum of gay and lesbian life. The situation today is one of fragmented social groups whose paths seldom cross. There are of course benefits to this diversity but the drawbacks for young gays and lesbians are that they are left to find their own way around without a complete picture.

The disinterested discourse demonstrated in Wight's (1996) work is different from the disinterested discourse of young gay men. Relationships are viewed as 'relationships are too hard'. This view does not, however, rule out sexual encounters. Emotional relationships involve too much energy and, as Erikson states, intimacy cannot be attained until identity is resolved. Unless one knows oneself it is problematic to try and relate to others. What happens to this disinterested discourse in later life has not been elucidated. However, all of the respondents did foresee themselves in some type of relationship, in the future.

One discourse, which requires further study, is that of the on-line shopper. The ability to be a virtual person and organise one's relationships on-line was only discussed by one respondent. It may present a solution for isolated young gays and lesbians to experiment with personas and have on-line interactions.

Another discourse is the fluid construction of sexual self. Amongst the respondents in this study there were several male and female respondents who conceptualised their sexuality as fluid. Gender blending is evident amongst young individuals who identify as bisexual/heterosexual (Herdt, 2001). It may be that this is the future direction of self-classification. If sexualities are truly plastic and dynamic these young respondents are creating a new social identity. Bisexuality has often been seen as a reaction or fear of coming out as gay or lesbian (Herdt, 2001). However, the new fluidity of sexuality is an expansion of bisexuality, as it includes restructuring of gendered performances. This study did not seek those who conceptualised themselves as bisexual; nevertheless it may be useful in future

research of all young people's sexual identities to explore fluidity within sexual preferences.

### **10.7 The Nature of the Stories**

The previous discussion has examined the three types of story found within the research. The multiplicity of relationships, whether sexual or friendships, involve the respondents in the creation of multiple identities, which are dependent on the type of social interaction they find themselves in. The respondents had to manage the telling of different stories to a variety of audiences in an effort to create a social space in which they could form relationships. The stories are part of the respondents' search for identity and intimacy.

The stories told about awareness of sexuality indicate that the young gays and lesbians are entering a different landscape than those of 30 years ago. They have some similar problems of homophobia, but also issues unique to this age. The new meanings of sexuality, the diversity of explanations and performances of identity are much more complex than in previous generations.

All of the story plots as described earlier are pertinent to this research and I am struck by the realisation that they all provide different conclusions. They offer different explanations and perspectives of what is happening in the lives of the respondents. The exemplar discussed in 8.2 presented a segment of the respondent's life story. Viewed through the lens of a journey the analysis would highlight the crises that led to the overdose. Viewing the story through the perspective of enduring suffering the respondent



concluded that the meaning of his suffering was because he was gay. The cost to escape was an attempt to end self. He engaged in a struggle against who he wanted to be and what he saw as the future. In pursuing consummation he almost obliterated self but survived transcended. Finally he established a home-a gay man with a jaundiced view of the future. As Plummer (1995) writes: 'This says nothing of the enormous complex personal stories behind such narratives' (Plummer, 1995; 56)

It can however give pointers to ways in which social interventions may produce happier outcomes.

Personal and sexual relationships and their formation is a key strand running through the stories. These stories tell of a desire to remain hidden, which results in a reduction in the level of intimacy they are able to have with their peers. There were several strategies employed during this time, as discussed in section 7.8: being part of the peer crowd in order to hide, and being apart from the peer crowd, or having single sex friends.

This desire to remain hidden also moves into sexual relationships, particularly amongst the male respondents. This raises issues of exploitation, safety and health risks particularly, but not exclusively for the young gay men. Sexual relationships showed distinct gender differences in the types of stories.

### 10.8 The Social Context of the Stories and Relationship with the Wider World

The question to be asked is: what is life like now, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for the young gay and lesbian? One of the major differences is the societal change that has occurred. The cultural scene that young people have to make sense of is much more complex. The dominant view from the literature (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992) is of a society in a state of flux. The increase in globalisation and the break up of the family all exert pressures on citizens. Life is now full of endless possibilities but, as Beck (2002) warns us, this goes hand in hand with increased isolation.

A young person today is faced with a plethora of information on all aspects of what it is to be a person. The question is: what are the effects of this change? The respondents' stories are not the traditional 'coming out' story, the story of the journey to a gay and lesbian haven of close social networks. The past story of a journey of suffering and redemption, a story from the hidden closet to public acknowledgement is no longer applicable. The story is now one of the formations of multiple relationships and a search for intimacy. The search for identity is no longer the search for a clearly defined social space.

The images of being gay and lesbian are enacted through television and the press. The television drama produces images of murderous lesbians<sup>19</sup>, sexually promiscuous men<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Brookside* soap drama

<sup>20</sup> *Queer as Folk* a gay soap drama

and gay and lesbian characters in the majority of television dramas<sup>21</sup>. The press in Scotland focused on the repeal of Section 28<sup>22</sup>. This coverage produced virulent anti homosexual rhetoric<sup>23</sup>, which impacted on the respondents' sense of belonging. The public stories of HIV and AIDS became part of the information pool, which young gay men utilised to fashion who they were. This multiplicity of dynamic images available to the young can lead to a constant process of rejection and confirmation. One example is what name to attach to oneself, when telling others.

...The word 'gay' has changed its meaning radically for the third time in fifty years. To our grandparents it meant happy. To middle-aged adults it is respectful slang for homosexual... But to young teenage boys it means outdated, old, useless – since they use the Ali G<sup>24</sup> phrase 'batty boy'... to mean homosexual (Morrison, 2003; 3).

Gay and lesbian are no longer the only labels that the young can use to denote a difference of sexual orientation: queer, transgendered have entered the vocabulary of the young. Coupled with these words is a set of social actions and political positions. The politics of sexuality have moved from social liberalisation towards individual freedoms of expression. As Gamson (1996) writes, the identity movement of the 60s and 70s has self-destructed. The move towards collectivism and social identity has made way for the rise of individualization and personalisation. The effect for the young gay and lesbian has

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<sup>21</sup> *The Bill*, police drama; *East Enders*, based in London

<sup>22</sup> Legislation banning the discussion of homosexuality in schools

<sup>23</sup> A Scottish businessman, Souter, financed an anti homosexual campaign.

<sup>24</sup> Ali G, a comedian

been the dismantling of the notion of a close-knit gay community. The process of acknowledgement of one's sexuality is no longer the coming out into a close-knit gay community. The gay community is now a more diffuse social group and multi-political group. The coming into this diffuse social space requires the young gay and lesbian to sift through the representations of what it is to be non-heterosexual. Many of these representations are imbued with stigmatised social meaning and the young gays and lesbians incorporated some of these meanings into their own identity, as discussed in section 7.4. For some of the young gay respondents the spectre of HIV and AIDS was incorporated into their perception of what life would be like for them as a gay man. The images of horrible painful death and of short tragic lives were contrasted with the stereotypes of effeminate behaviour. All of these images were far removed from their own social lives. Lesbians were seen as being either strong independent women or fat and pornographic. There was no notion that gays and lesbians might just be like them, only older.

Hackett (1997) discusses the assumption of apolitical behaviour amongst the youth. Beasant (1995) puts forward the idea that this is as a result of delayed adolescence and increased dependence on adults. Whether this is the case or not is debatable, but what is evident is that young people participate in youth groups, which are representative of their political interests. The gay and lesbian community is viewed as diffuse and no more representative of their interest than the rest of adult society. Thus, the gay and lesbian politics of the young is centred round groups such as Stonewall, which are perceived as representing their interests and are focused on young people. Those individuals' outwith

gay and lesbian youth groups have limited opportunity in which to exercise political action. Access to young gay and lesbian groups is as limited, within Scotland, as access to gay and lesbian groups was 30 years ago. One could surmise that until there is a burgeoning of young gay and lesbian groups within Scotland, political action by the youth will remain diffuse and largely unheard.

Within the social milieu, the call for integration not separation has created social spaces where freedom to express oneself is the motivation for gathering rather than the creation of a distinct gay space. The young of today in this study are as likely to go to a straight club with their partner as a gay club. The respondents now 'come in' to complex social spaces where a multiplicity of sexual stories are clamouring to be heard.

The movement towards individuation and the multiple manufactured images of homosexuality exerts contradictory pressures on the young gays and lesbians. Older gays and lesbians reflecting 30 years ago, when there were relatively few images of homosexuality, voiced the feelings that they thought they were the only one. They also describe the process of rejecting the very negative images that they came across (Plummer, 1975). None of the respondents in this study thought they were the only homosexual in the world. The respondents had not one negative image to reject, but a multitude of images to sift through. Section 7.4 explores the multiple images that the respondents had to sift through. This is indeed progress, but whereas young heterosexuals can identify with positive role models and practise their identities through their social relations, young gays and lesbians are limited, in this respect. With one exception within

this study the role models were celluloid characters devoid of any possibility of interaction. The respondent who did have access to an older gay relative was able to discuss topics such as safe sex. He also had a ready-made social space within his family. The others were left to try and form relationships with heterosexual peers.

Life now for the young respondents is a much more complex social space where the formation of relationships is their primary focus.

The story of enduring suffering is one of the themes that arise from this research. This story is by no means the only story and is not the focus of this research. Nevertheless, it is a story which requires to be heard. There were within the data examples of self-harm, suicide attempts, negative attitudes to self and the putting of one's life on hold. These stories of private suffering and vulnerability highlight that societal attitude to homosexuality has yet to create an environment which is safe for all its citizens. The lack of support available to some of the respondents created the situation whereby they were placed in vulnerable situations. Sometimes this was in the area of sexual exploitation, whilst in others it was bullying. In a rather perverse way the increase in awareness of homosexuality has made it more difficult for young gays and lesbians to avoid this harassment. That is not to advocate a return to the closet but to advocate the setting up of support networks for young gays and lesbians.



## 10.9 Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

Research into young gays' and lesbians' lives, as Griffin (1993) argues, has been removed from mainstream research into young people. There are benefits and disadvantages in conducting research exclusively about young gays and lesbians. There is the danger that by conducting this type of research I have created other, that I have further marginalised young gay and lesbians by focusing entirely on their concerns. By not using the term 'non-heterosexual relationships', I may have also excluded even greater sexual diversity. Heaphy *et al* (1998) acknowledge that their own use of the term non-heterosexual collapsed into gay and lesbian and was problematic. The use of the term non-heterosexual is difficult as it sets up as the norm heterosexuality and all else as different. The problem however becomes one of how to include all young people within research. Unless non-heterosexuals are recruited specifically to give voice then I would suggest that particularly amongst the young they would not perceive themselves to be part of the target group. It may be that future research into relationships amongst young people should conduct concurrent research whereby both groups are targeted. This would allow comparison of similarity and differences to be made from a similar target group. The advantage of conducting this research is nevertheless that voice has been given to a group that is usually unheard or mentioned in passing. Future research into young gays' and lesbians' relationships using a longitudinal perspective is necessary in order to answer questions regarding the effects of early lack of intimacy on young gays and lesbians. In order to demonstrate the effects of societal change, Boxer & Cohler (1989) advocated that longitudinal research requires to be conducted as each new cohort of young gays and lesbians comes of age, a conclusion I would agree with.



Whilst conducting the interviews I was aware that when the respondents were discussing their relationships I was only hearing one side of the story. I had no access to the parents or peers they were discussing. I have reservations that this approach did not cover as complete a picture of friendships than if I had been able to access both parents and peers viewpoints. Despite these reservations there are some interesting findings which require further study. A longitudinal study charting friendship patterns and subsequent effects on adult relationships could prove useful. I would consider it necessary in subsequent relationship study to try and interview all parties.

Further study is required, in particular about young lesbians' sexual discourses, but what is apparent is that there are both similarities and differences amongst heterosexual and homosexual sexual discourses, amongst the young. It is important to recognise that within the young lesbians' discourse about sexual relationships there is a discourse of sexual relationships with men, as discussed in 9.8. There are implications regarding sexual health for this group of young women. An interesting line of inquiry would be to examine the effect of recent same sex-partnership legislation on young gays' and lesbians' ideas about relationship.

Within the research, the accounts of the feelings by the respondent about their sexuality were often in their words *put on hold*. The research on the focal model in the literature review if applied to this observation raised several questions which, as I am unable to answer from the data and requires further study. What is the long term-effect on the

respondents of not addressing these needs as they arise? Do young gays and lesbians focus on other developmental tasks? An interesting avenue of research could be to apply the focal model to young gays and lesbians to answer these questions.

The presentation of the data within this research followed three distinct paths. Chapter 7 was an exploration of intra-psychic scripts in the construction of a sense of self. The theme was an uncovering of the process of becoming comfortable with self. Chapter 8 was the presentation of data using a case study and the subsequent drawing out of arising themes. Chapter 9 was the examination of discourses on relations presented from gender differences. These three methods of presenting data raise useful insights and hopefully demonstrate the complex dynamic nature of the young participants' lives.

The research very clearly had as one of its aims to explore what was happening in the lives of young gays and lesbians on a local level. What was discovered in particular within the setting of the school was incidents of bullying and lack of support. This is illustrated by the data in section 8.6. On a local level this has implications for education authorities to try and address this institutional homophobia. The research reflects what is happening on a national and international level (Gordon *et al*, 2000).

However, it is not just the eradication of bullying that is of concern. There exists a real concern about educational input. In section 8.10 the data illustrates several examples of lack of educational input. Without an adequate knowledge base young gays and lesbians are ill-prepared to form relationships. Sections 8.8 and 9.4 illustrate that especially the

young gay participants found themselves in situations with older gay men where there were risks of exploitation. This places them at risk from sexually transmitted disease and physical and emotional harm. We owe it to all our young people to prepare them to have happy and safe relationships.

### **10.10 Final Words**

When I started this research I wished to ascertain a glimpse of how life was now for young gays and lesbians. From the vantage point of a much older person I viewed the new social opportunities available to the young with some degree of envy. After the first interview I was faced with a story which displayed pathology and I was apprehensive that I would reinforce a stereotypical view of young gays and lesbians as in need of professional help. The conclusion is rather different on two counts.

The new social opportunities do open up new ways of expression, but whether the young gays and lesbians are adequately prepared to take advantage of this is debatable. The research demonstrated that young gays and lesbian discourses about sexual relationships were different from their heterosexual peers. The increased social awareness of sexuality has meant that young gays and lesbians are now more visible and as a consequence of this a subsequent increase in bullying has become evident. This increase in the social and emotional pressure on young gays and lesbian has led to examples of extreme distress as illustrated within this research. It is not that young gays and lesbians are in need of

professional help, as was my first fear, but that the institutions that purport to care require a more humane approach. Our society has an obligation to all young people to provide a life free from prejudice and furnish them with the necessary life skills and information that they then may take their place as fully integrated citizens. What is heartening from this research is that despite the many obstacles placed in their way young gays and lesbians are educating their peers and pushing back the frontiers of prejudice. The young gays and lesbians within this research had very optimistic views of the future which I hope come to fruition. It may be that at present the social and emotional space they occupy is restricted by elements outwith their control and they envisage that with greater economic and personal autonomy they will be able to fashion their lives in a more personally rewarding and fruitful way. This research has highlighted issues that may provide fruitful avenues for further research. The knowledge base that is currently held on young gays' and lesbians' relationships should at the very least be on a par with their heterosexual counterparts. Future research into young gays' and lesbians' sexual and other types of relationships will be best served using a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating Plummer's (1995) approach to stories. This will allow both the social and emotional voices of the young gays and lesbians to be heard.

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